

# Rolling Stone<sup>UK</sup>

JUNE/JULY 2022  
ISSUE 005



Foals  
Potter Payper  
Louis Partridge  
Bad Boy Chiller Crew  
Porridge Radio  
Phoebe Green  
Static Dress  
Priya Ragu  
CMAT  
Yola

# FLORENCE

On life beyond the fairy tale



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# HOW IT'S GOING





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# Contents

92

## Static feedback

The most exciting new heavy band in the UK on their debut album

100

## 30 and Falling

Women in pop are exploring emotional maturity and heartbreak in their thirties

124

## Working Class Act

How class dictates taste in fashion, art and media, by editor Ione Gamble

154

## Strangest Thing

Actor Noah Schnapp on playing Will in the fourth season of the Netflix classic



ISSUE  
005

"The times we're living in, everyone's just sick to death. Everyone just wants to have a laugh"

Kane, Bad Boy Chiller Crew



# Contents

## Features

- 68 **Florence**  
Our ethereal cover star talks her new album and the big questions of art and children
- 80 **Foals**  
We join the indie band as they rehearse for a summer of touring
- 90 **Nova Twins**  
Britain's hottest rock duo reveal the influences that shaped their boundary-smashing second album
- 106 **Bad Boys**  
It's mayhem on tour with Bad Boy Chiller Crew
- 114 **Sid Vicious**  
Louis Partridge on playing the infamous Pistols bassist
- 120 **Jamal Edwards**  
We celebrate the man who changed the British music scene
- 130 **Potter Payper**  
A life marked by prison and deprivation helped make a star
- 136 **Bella Poarch**  
The TikTok star taking over the pop world
- 140 **Crimewatchers**  
Meet the vigilante group set on saving Droylsden
- 146 **Art on vinyl**  
The work of three masters of album art design
- 158 **The Truman Babies**  
Children filmed from birth for online content have come of age

42

## The Mix

- 27 **CMAT**  
The whip-smart country pop singer who became Ireland's biggest and brightest talent
- 30 **90s club scene**  
Snapshots from *While You Were Sleeping*
- 31 **Priya Ragu**  
The Swiss-Tamil singer on following her passion
- 32 **Sam Raimi**  
The director on the Marvel Multiverse
- 38 **Anitta**  
Brazilian bombshell

- 42 **Yola**  
How a singer from Bristol became Americana's hottest voice
- 44 **Porridge Radio**  
Brighton indie stars are tackling new sonic ground with their genre-bending third album
- 46 **Natasha Lyonne**  
The actress gets metaphysical
- 50 **Pinocchio**  
We compare the trio of movies out this year
- 52 **Phoebe Green**  
The Manchester singer is embracing pop for her new, future-facing sound

- 54 **Taylor Hawkins**  
Mourning the loss of a musical superstar
- Current Affairs**
- 56 **Cost of Living**  
There is an alternative to economic suffering
- 60 **Ukraine**  
How the country won the battle for Kyiv
- Reviews**
- 165 **Music**  
Liam Gallagher, Florence, Arcade Fire and more

- 168 **TV**  
We rate the best and worst on the box
- 170 **Film**  
A miss or a must see?
- 172 **Road test**  
Speed away with the Genesis GV80
- 176 **Tech**  
We round up the latest gadgets
- Departments**
- Contributors 18
- Opening Act 20
- RS Recommends 40
- Style 174
- The Last Word 178

"I was burning alive and I realised that 18 months ago, I didn't like my life. But now I liked my life and I was laughing that I would take it at that point"







Thomas Sabo

REBEL AT HEART



# Editor's Letter

## With emotional extremes comes a tide of creativity



IF YOU WORK in a creative industry and don't find yourself experiencing moments of swingeing self-doubt, you're either disengaged from your feelings or not listening to your head properly. The inner turmoil and repetitious questioning can be torturous. But when the grey cloud shifts and all the bullshit suddenly makes sense, it becomes the most intoxicating of highs, unleashing a creative flurry that makes the bumpy road seem almost worthwhile.

Many of music's most iconic albums have been born from an artist's internal strife and the elation that comes with being drunk on the clarity that follows. Having the talent to channel that energy into sound, and then share it with the world, is truly one of the most glorious pleasures that I can only ever imagine. Luckily, the world doesn't have to endure my singing – that's not something I'd unleash no matter how drunk I am at the Karaoke Hole in Dalston – but I do have the privilege of channelling other artists' remarkable creative journeys in the pages of Rolling Stone UK.

Case in point, Florence (Welch, of '+ the Machine'), who perfectly embodies the transition from stifling anxiety to glistening lucidity on her latest long-player *Dance Fever* in this issue's exceptionally intimate cover story. Or Static Dress, whose frontman Olli Appleyard speaks about their defining debut album *Rouge Carpet Disaster*. And writer Ione Gamble, who unpicks how we place value on wealth to define good taste.

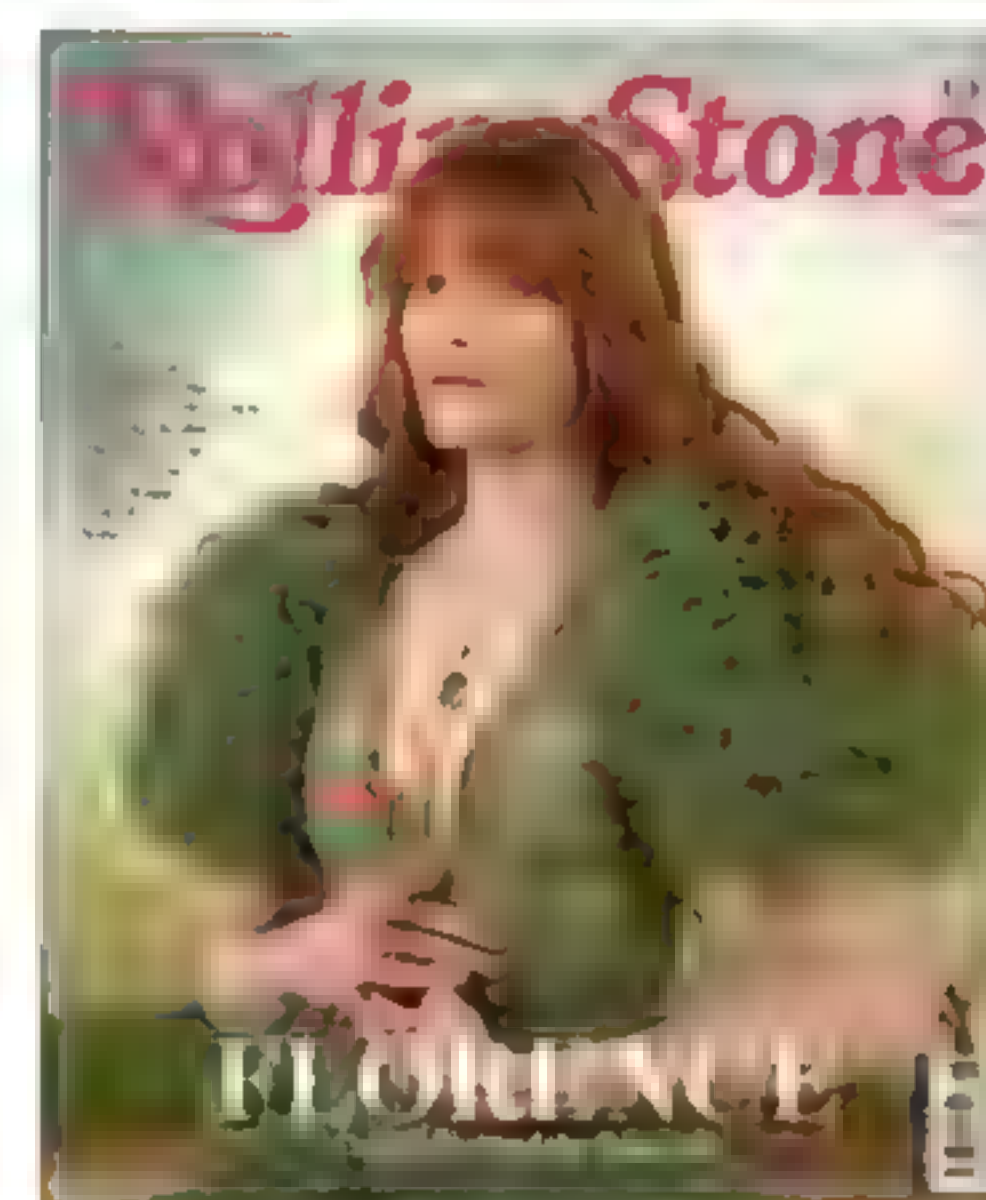
Elsewhere in this issue, Phoebe Green explores self-destructive behaviour born from PTSD, which she's now seeking to reason with through her art, while Potter Payper reflects on a criminal past and the responsibility he now carries as one of the UK's most exciting rap artists. Change is the only constant in life. We either roll with it and enjoy the ride – or allow ourselves to be crushed beneath its wheels.

"Music changes, and I'm gonna change right along with it," said the late and great Aretha Franklin. And who are we to argue with the Queen of Soul?

**"Music's most iconic albums have been born from an artist's internal strife and the elation that comes from the clarity that follows"**

CLIFF JOANNOU  
EDITOR IN CHIEF

### ON THE COVER



PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUTH OSSAI  
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STYLING BY ALDENE JOHNSON

FLORENCE WEARS DRESS BY GUCCI,  
NECKLACE BY REBECCA SWEETING,  
RINGS, FLORENCE'S OWN



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# Contributors



**Ruth Ossai**  
PHOTOGRAPHER

I have always felt that Florence Welch as an artist has a very strong visual language that would work perfectly within my own art. Florence and I were very much in sync as truly organic co-collaborators, with both of our artistic worlds coming together perfectly to create this beautiful story for Rolling Stone UK.



**Nana Baah**  
WRITER

When the news of Jamal Edwards’ untimely passing broke, there was a huge blow that rippled across different sectors of the UK from musicians to MPs to royalty. He was someone who helped shape the music scene in Britain and not only went on to use his influence to help artists overseas, but also had an impact through his charity work where he grew up in Acton, west London. It was an honour to spend time hearing stories about Edwards from those closest to him; the ones who grew with him and helped build SBTU as well as those who only had occasional encounters with him. It’s rare for someone so young to have such a long-lasting legacy and it was truly inspiring to try to capture it on paper.



**Will Richards**  
MUSIC JOURNALIST

The last time I interviewed Porridge Radio’s Dana Margolin was in January 2020, a few months before they released second album *Every Bad* and then had to witness its runaway success while stuck inside. Meeting in London two years later for my latest Rolling Stone UK piece, we talked about the intervening time and how she wanted new album *Waterslide, Diving Board, Ladder to the Sky* to sound “stadium epic”. It’s been a pleasure to conduct face-to-face interviews again recently, and to meet Dana and discuss the new album, playing live again and her obsession with Lorde.

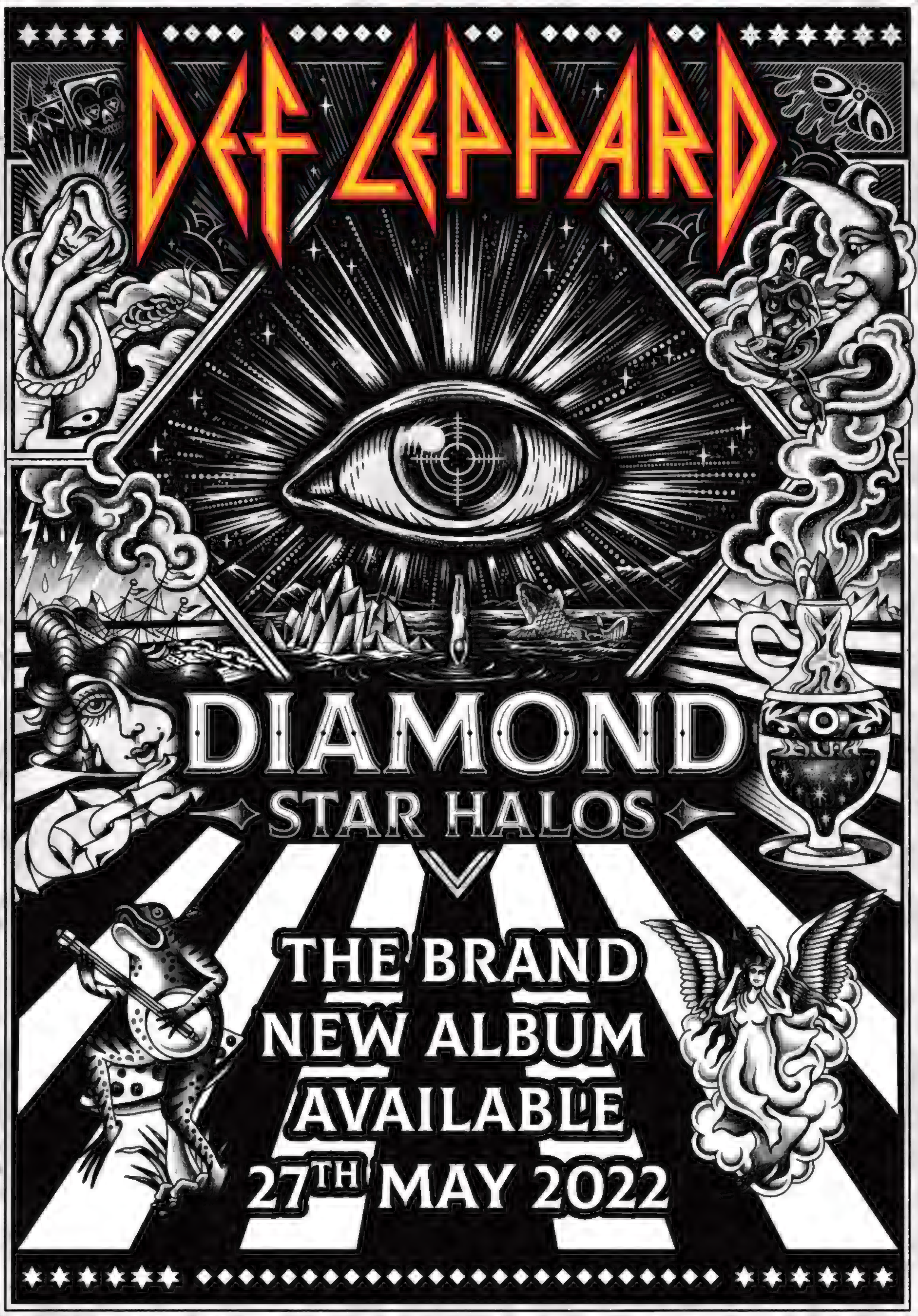


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# Opening Act

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## Rock your boat

Rowing Blazers creator, Jack Carlson, is multi-talented in a big way (move over Sharpay Evans). A designer, author, archaeologist and former US national rowing team athlete, he's now created a brand with a cult-like status. Combining traditional preppy pieces with poppy colours and streetwear, Rowing Blazers' latest collection is fronted by plenty of A-listers, including man of the moment Pete Davidson (pictured).

[ROWINGBLAZERS.COM](http://ROWINGBLAZERS.COM)





# Opening Act

## Open Season

As kids we wanted a Jaguar XKSS because Steve McQueen had one. It was the coolest thing. Then we wanted a Jaguar XJC because we saw one in *The New Avengers* TV series, and it looked like a racing car. Now, we want a Jaguar C-X75 like the one the baddie drove in *Spectre* to chase down James Bond, but we can't have one as Jaguar built only 10 prototypes. Pictured here, though, is the Jaguar supercar almost anyone can have: the Jaguar Vision GT Roadster created in Jaguar's own Coventry design studio. It's all-electric, boasts 1000bhp, a maximum speed of 200mph and can hit 60mph from standstill in two seconds. All within the recently landed *Gran Turismo Sport* on PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 5 consoles. Game on.

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## Eco mode

Dsquared2 are forging a more planet-friendly footprint with their One Life One Planet and Smiley capsule collection. Made from recycled and organic cotton that's GRS (Global Recycle Standard), GOTS (Global Organic Textile Standard) and OCS (Organic Content Standard) certified, the range has their ever-present patriotic maple leaf teamed with a smiley motif splashed across sweatshirts, T-shirts, joggers and shorts. The range also includes espadrilles, sneakers, bucket hats, belts, baseball caps and bandanas made with the same materials and processes, continuing the brand's pledge to reduce their environmental impact. Power to these eco-responsible kings.

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# Opening Act

## Grime goes big

The Museum of London will celebrate one of 21st-century Britain's most trailblazing music genres this summer. Opening on 17 June, Grime Stories: From the Corner to the Mainstream will feature specially commissioned films, displays and contributions from its pioneers to explore the genre's proud east London roots and reveal how it transformed the UK's musical landscape. One of the highlights is a special tribute to the Leyton basement where BBK icon Jammer (pictured in basement) first recorded the legendary Lord of the MICS sessions. "It's official, Museum of London we about to do the Mazza," says Jammer. "Just know it's about to be mad. Big up my guy Risky Roadz - let's go. This one's for the culture! We really do this."

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## Heart and soul

Add some edge to your look this summer with the latest Thomas Sabo Rebel At Heart accessories. Elevate your eyewear with the boho-style Johnny Panto Skull sunglasses (pictured). Complete with the signature Thomas Sabo skull at the temples, they come in three subtle colourways (from £179). Perhaps it's time for a new watch? Featuring a dial with a two-layer cross motif, the collection's Rebel Urban men's chronograph will make a strong statement (pictured, £359).

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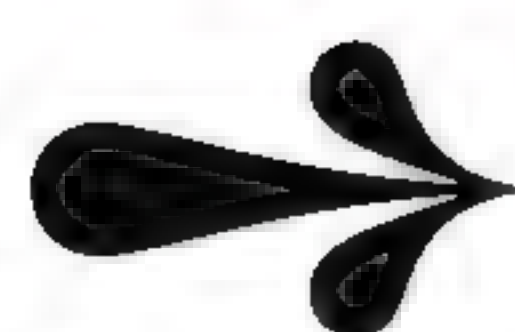
# the new MIX

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

## Global celebrity teen pop sensation

*Dubliner CMAT – aka Ciara Mary-Alice Thompson – combines humour with pop culture and a country mashup to create a unique sound that has marked her as one to most definitely watch ➔*





The laidbare, stark emotion of country music doesn't seem like

the ideal bedfellow for references to Robbie Williams, Anna Nicole Smith, Gaelic football and Marian Keyes, but welcome to the world of CMAT.

Describing herself in her Twitter bio as a “global celebrity teen pop sensation”, Dublin-born Ciara Mary-Alice Thompson first gained attention from Irish music stations with ‘Another Day (kfc)’, a relatable tune about crying in a chicken shop over a failed relationship. That humour is a continuing theme on the 26-year-old’s debut album, *If My Wife New I’d Be Dead*, which Thompson describes as “if XTC was writing for The Nolans” and “the Nolans were making that record with Glen Campbell, which would go on to be covered by Paris Hilton.”

But in between the jokes and pop-culture references, Thompson offers searing insights into loneliness and prioritising the sesh over stability, a country twang that’s as comfortable on a disco pop song as it is on a searing ballad, and some of the most engaging songwriting out there right now. Having hit No. 1 on the Irish album charts and taken the CMAT experience everywhere from Leeds to Nashville, it’s starting to look like that self-assigned Twitter bio is the real deal.

**For the uninitiated, how would you describe CMAT in one sentence?**

Really fun, but with a lot of heart. **How long was the process of putting the album together; was it years in the making or an entirely new concept?**

In some ways, the album was in the making for a very long time, but I think that will be the case for every single album I make. There’s always going to be things knocking around for years that took a while to come to fruition. But in terms of the album concept and the arrangement and writing, it was a really quick turnaround. I went away for a month in January 2021 and I wrote two or three songs that were brand new; one

## “I just do what I like. Whatever I’m into at that moment is the music I’m gonna make”

of them was ‘No More Virgos’, which I wrote from scratch. Then it was recorded in April, mastered and delivered by August. It was a really quick album to make, but I think that’s because I’ve written so much for so long and there’s been so many things bubbling away on the back burner. I’m a good enough songwriter at this point to know when something is ready and something isn’t ready, and what goes together and what doesn’t. I had enough songs for six albums if I wanted to, but I didn’t do that because it would have been terrible.

**There’s a clear country influence on the record. When did that love affair begin?**

I’ve been trying to pinpoint this for a while now. When I was a kid, growing up in Dublin, Johnny Cash was a god. And then the *Walk the Line* film came out – which, I will go on record saying, [is] one of the worst biopics in the world but one of the best films. I fucking love that film. I was in love with the soundtrack and loved Johnny Cash and June Carter. Then I heard all of Dolly Parton at, like, 11. She was described to me when I was quite young and I was like, ‘Yeah. I’m on board.’ It’s just been a slow burn, it’s the genre I always seem to come back to.

**There’s plenty of songs on the album that could have listeners thinking you’re a country artist, but then there’s full-blown pop songs, too. Do you think of yourself as an artist in a certain genre?**

I think the way I’ve been working sounds simple, but not a lot of artists remember to do it – I just do what I like. Whatever the thing I’m into at that moment in time is the music I’m gonna make, or the kind of thing I try to emulate. I have such

a wide variety of influences I take from, and I think the connecting factor is me and the songwriting. That’s why I can go from a song like ‘Geography Teacher’ to ‘No More Virgos’ on the same record – they belong together because I’m writing them and I’m singing them. No one song is ever going to be a direct rip of any one genre. Like, ‘No More Virgos’ has a lot of Charley Pride things on it, even though it’s a disco song. I’ll literally be like, ‘I want to make a song that sounds like the verse of this one song by Pentangle, with a chorus like a Kelly Clarkson song,’ and I’ll just do that. There’s no point pigeonholing myself because people can see through it – fans are very perceptive. If I think something is the coolest thing on the planet, I should just do that and I don’t need to worry about always doing cowboy shit. Like, I’ve got really into Bob Fosse lately.

**So we’re going to see a CMAT Chicago album?**

I keep telling people the second album will be Bob Fosse meets Gillian Welch. I think I can do it! This is what I mean – if I’m enjoying myself, I think other people will enjoy it.

**There’s a lot of pop culture references and humour in your songs, followed by the saddest thing you’ve ever heard. Do you find it difficult merging the two?**

It comes very easy to me to say something really dark and then be like, “Bleh!” Me and all my friends will just be in conversation saying the saddest things ever, then making funny faces at each other. Like, “Wow, I really think that I’m



not getting what I want from life...” [pulls face].

**There’s also a lot of Irish references in there. Does your Irishness have much of an influence on your songwriting?**

It’s not a conscious thing. But because I spent all of my time in Ireland up until a couple



**MIXING IT UP**  
CMAT refuses  
to confine  
herself to one  
genre



of years ago, all my references are going to be Irish and I'm not going to apologise for that. I won't generalise my references to appeal to an American audience or whatever – if they like it, they'll just learn what it is. Fiona Apple is always singing about things I don't know, and then I'll fall down a Wikipedia hole reading about it. But as much as my Irishness influences me, I won't apologise for making references that aren't Irish. A lot of people gave out to me over the Waitrose lyric. I'm sorry, I lived in Manchester for two years!

**Do you have a favourite song on the album?**

It changes all of the time, but I'm particularly proud of 'Peter

Bogdanovich', because it's just so weird and still successfully catchy. And I'm really proud of 'Lonely', because at every single live show, I'll sing the chorus and the entire crowd sings backup.

**Have you still been writing on tour or have you allowed yourself to soak up the first album?**

Oh, no, I don't do that. Sure, I was writing the second album while I was writing the first album. I get really snappy when I can't write songs. If there's too much touring or press or whatever and I haven't got time to write, I become really irritable and agitated. You can do press and promotion for days, you can have the best press team in the world, the most money,

you can be the skinniest, most attractive 13-year-old or whatever it is the music industry wants, and it doesn't matter a flying fuck if you don't have songs that mean something and will connect with people. And the only way you can have those songs is spending time by yourself and figuring out what it is that's affecting you and writing from an honest place.

**So do you see yourself as a songwriter first and a pop star second?**

I'm a songwriter and being a pop star serves the songs well. In an ideal world, if I could write the songs I've written and give them to somebody to perform and do the touring, I would – but I also know that nobody can perform or sell or platform the songs in a way that is as good as I can. I'm always just trying to serve the songs in the best way possible. I'm a little bitch for my songs.

**You put a lot of effort into the visuals, from your videos to your**

**record artwork. How important is that side of things?**

I think the visuals are as important as the songs. The two have to marry each other. You can have an amazing song, and then it doesn't have a music video, or the video is just [singing] *"I'm sitting against a studio backdrop, and I've got a ring light on, and I'm being sexy"*... Listen, don't get me wrong, it's very important to be sexy at all times, I do it constantly. But I think if you can get visuals that are inspired by the music and there's stuff that looks like how the music sounds, you just can't beat it. A great example of that is – not to blow smoke up their holes – Fontaines D.C.'s album rollout. The visuals are just insane, and they're on their third album and they've just hit their stride. It actually stresses me out how much I already love this record. I'll be very happy to lose the Choice Music Prize to them next year. I'd be kind of raging if I won over them. **EMMA KELLY**



PHOTOS

# Euphoria on the Dance Floor

➤ EWEN SPENCER spent the late 90s at the centre of a London nightlife boom. Flush with end-of-history optimism and irreverent British snark, a new generation fostered an environment where subcultures could thrive and parties could run wild. Working for the upstart magazine *Sleazation*, Spencer spent his weekends snapping photos of late-night euphoria that appeared alongside club listings and reviews in the back pages. More than 20 years later, Spencer has collected his photos from this era in a new book, *While You Were Sleeping, 1998-2000*. Lately, Spencer says, he's seen signs of that old energy coming back. "Clubbing now is almost replicating what we're seeing in these pictures," he says. "People are harking back to this era." JON BLISTEIN



## ▲ A MOMENT OF HOPE

"The 90s were our 60s," Spencer says of the hope coursing through Britain's nightlife boom. "It felt like something was changing — we had a new government, and people were really optimistic at that time."

## ▼ GET DOWN

Early in the evening, Spencer would often chat with the partygoers. Later on, less so. "When it's two in the morning and people are swinging off the light fittings, I know what I'm going to be doing," he quips.



## ▼ KICK IT OUT

DJ-producer Keb Darge, who got his start in the Northern Soul scene, cuts loose at his "Deep Funk" night. "He was a great soul dancer back in the day," says Spencer.



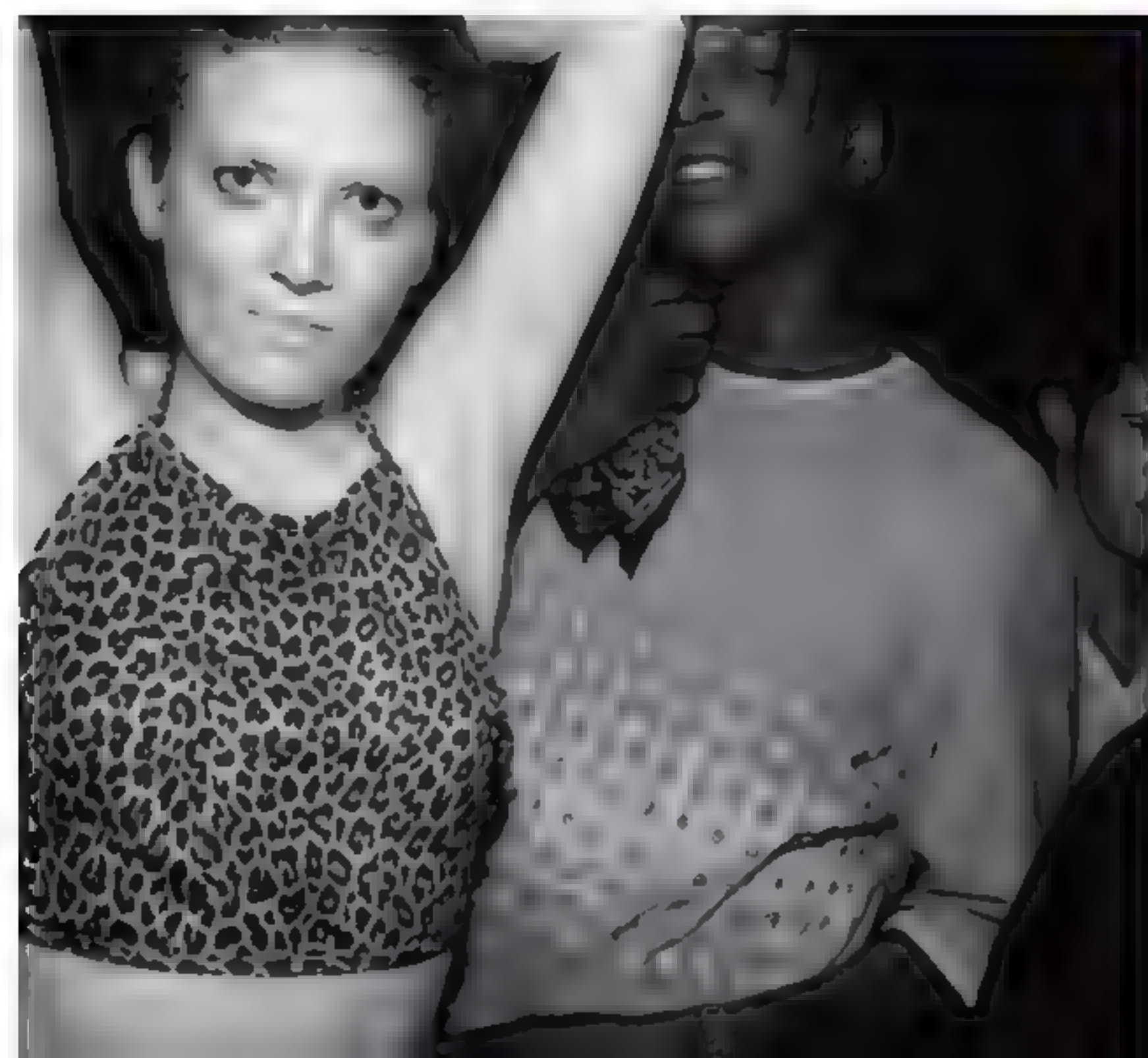
## ◀ GARAGE JAMS

Outside London, Spencer says the working-class atmosphere of club life was even more pronounced: "Even though these kids don't work in factories any more, there's still that [idea] of 'Work hard, play hard'."



## ◀ LATE-NIGHT TALES

"I'd look for characters," Spencer says of his approach to club photography. "I'd grown up in that era of Ecstasy coming to the forefront and parties moving away from soul music and hip hop into house. So when I went into these spaces, I had a vernacular."



**While You Were Sleeping**  
Damiani, £40



# Passion comes first

*A dilemma over duty kept Swiss-Tamil singer Priya Ragu from pursuing music – until she had an epiphany...*

➔ For living, breathing proof that it's never too late to follow your dreams, look no further than Swiss-Tamil singer Priya Ragu. Just months prior to being longlisted for the BBC Sound of 2022 at the age of 36, she was working full-time at an airline as an accountant and technical purchaser.

"I had always suppressed my musical ambitions," she admits, speaking from her family home in the Swiss city of St. Gallen, where she's enjoying a rare week off. "But one day I was just like, 'There must be more to life than this.' And I realised that the very least I could do is show some respect to my talent."

As last September's 10-track mixtape proved, her hunch was 100 per cent correct. Blending glossy R&B and hip hop with Tamil folk and Kollywood samples – a vivid fusion she's since dubbed 'Raguwavy' – *damnshestamil* announced the arrival of an utterly unique musical voice. And as March's follow-up single 'Illuminous' confirms, it's a foundation she only intends to improve upon, interpolating more electronic textures into her buoyant signature sound. So, you have to wonder, why did it take Ragu so long to back herself? The answer is complicated.

Born in Switzerland to refugees of the Sri Lankan civil war, she recalls that for her family there was always a very stark divide between duty and passion. "My father is very musically talented, but he didn't have the opportunity to pursue it professionally, because it was all about building a new life in a foreign country and providing for the family," she explains. "He'd

organise jam sessions with his friends at weekends, but music was always secondary."

As a child, Ragu would often sing in Tamil at these gatherings, and she later undertook violin lessons at school. But it wasn't until she discovered R&B and hip hop in her mid-teens that her passion for music was truly ignited. Defying her parents – who disapproved of Western music – she would compete with her older brother to find the coolest artists, devouring the catalogues of Donny

Hathaway, Brandy and Lauryn Hill, while dedicating the rest of her spare time to honing her own vocal talents.

Upon relocating to Zurich in her early twenties, she began secretly performing at open-mic nights and collaborating with local artists, a set-up she maintained for the best part of a decade before her aforementioned epiphany.

Putting aside six months to come up with 10 songs, in 2017 she moved to New York, immersed herself in their open-mic scene, and hit up

her old friend Oddisee for use of his studio. It was here she began collaborating remotely with her brother, who by that point was an established music producer operating under the pseudonym Japhna Gold.

"It all happened so organically," Ragu recalls. "I remember one day he was like, 'What if I just flipped the beat?' And then I was like, 'OK, well, maybe I can chant at the end? Radio might not play it because it's another language, but fuck it!' So almost instantly, our sound found us. And it gave us purpose."

It's that drive and ambition that Ragu is determined to pass onto her fans, leading by example in being unapologetically and authentically herself, and sharing songs packed with positive energy. When, on 'Illuminous', she sings a line like, "Blessings all come from life lessons," it's so much more than a mere platitude: it's hard-won wisdom.

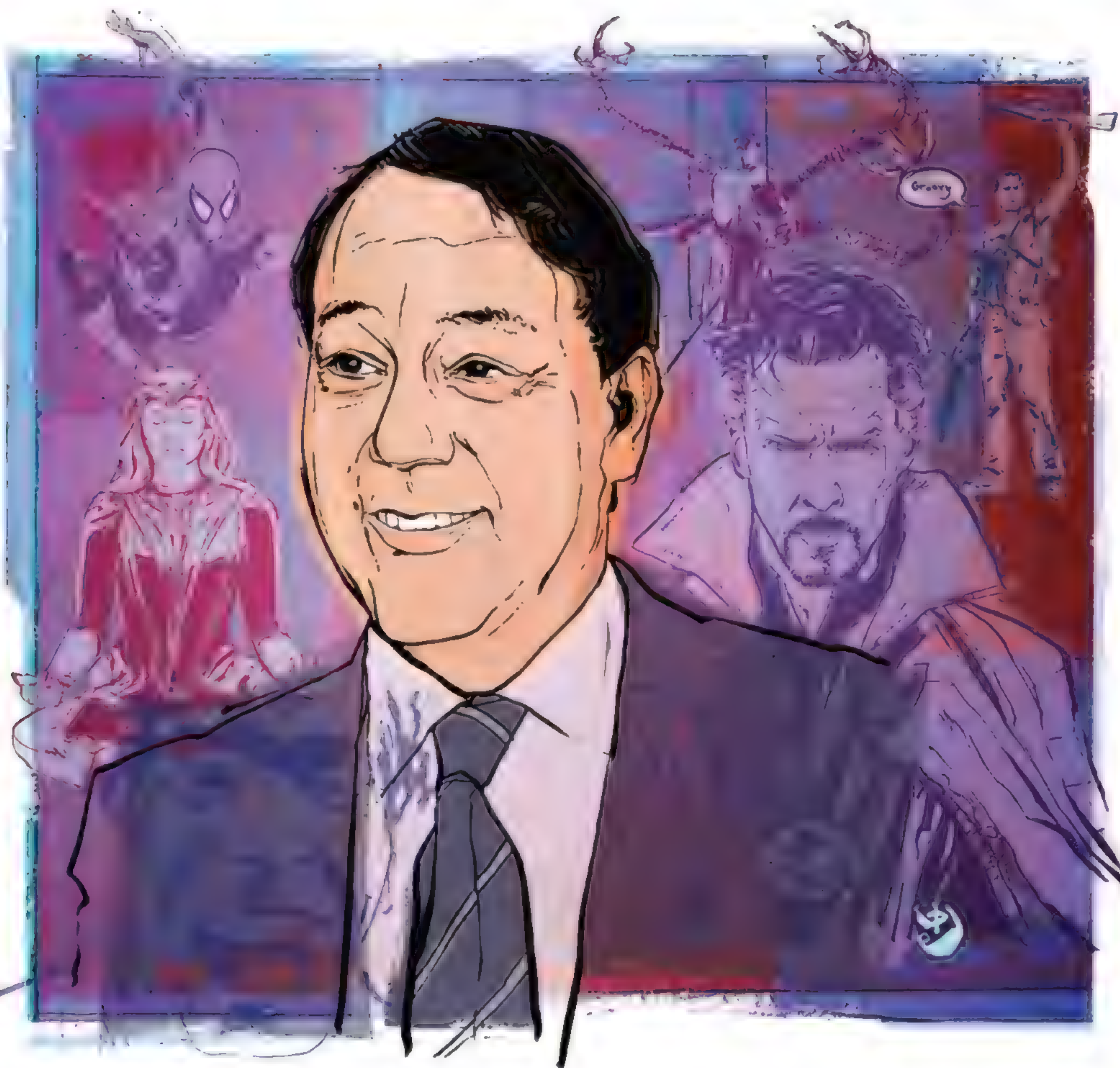
Today that unshakeable optimism is winning Ragu scores of fans all over the world, with artists like M.I.A., Chronixx and Shawn Mendes all lining up to pay tribute to her colourful, groove-driven productions. Contemplating her rapid ascent, Ragu still seems taken aback by how far she's come.

"The whole journey felt effortless at the time, but now I realise I broke a lot of barriers, when it comes to my age and the fact I come from Switzerland – a country so far away from the music industry. And then I'm a woman, and not only that, I'm a Brown woman... When I look back, I'm like, 'Oh shit, so I overcame all this to get here?' Honestly, it's just so beautiful."

GEMMA SAMWAYS







SUPERHEROES INC.

# Sam Raimi Conquers Marvel's Multiverse

*The director who helped turn superhero movies into pop mythmaking returns – and he's ready to start his second act*

BY BRIAN HIATT

**F**OR SAM RAIMI, the final weeks of making his first superhero movie since he helped kick-start the genre's modern era with his *Spider-Man* trilogy in the 00s are pure multitasking madness. From his home in Los Angeles, the director is working on *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*

in three places at once, virtually watching over composer Danny Elfman laying down a score with an orchestra at Abbey Road Studios in London, while also listening in on actors rerecording dialogue, and supervising the movie's sound mix. It all fits with a process that also had screenwriter Michael Waldron

(who brought a deft comic touch to the Disney+ show *Loki*) finishing the screenplay while Raimi was in the process of shooting the movie. He'd taken over the project after Scott Derrickson, who directed the first *Doctor Strange*, in 2016, exited the sequel, citing "creative differences". With a script to redo and a shooting deadline already in

place, Raimi was behind schedule before he'd even started.

But Raimi seems to relish the chaotic creation of this latest *Doctor Strange* movie, which hits cinemas on 6 May. After all, he made the gonzo indie horror classic *The Evil Dead* at age 20 for a mere \$350,000, inventing camera techniques and pioneering new levels of homemade makeup grotesqueries as he went.

*Multiverse* is essentially a direct sequel to three different Marvel properties: the original *Doctor Strange*, last year's *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, and the Disney+ TV show *WandaVision*, with Elizabeth Olsen's Wanda Maximoff on board as the film's second lead character. "It's a really complex movie," says Raimi, who used reshoots earlier in 2022 in part to clarify the story. "It's probably the most complex movie I've ever had anything to do with. Not just dealing with one character, or even five characters, but multiversal versions of those characters – and each one has a storyline."

In an age when "visionary director" has become a marketing cliché, Raimi is the real thing, his camera a living, even violent presence in his films. Career high points range from his absurdist horror masterpiece *Evil Dead 2* (1987) and the comic-book-movie-without-the-comic-book *Darkman* (1990) to the masterful, noirish drama *A Simple Plan* (1998). And, of course, the aforementioned *Spider-Man* movies, which helped pave the way for Marvel's current multiplex domination. Raimi hadn't made a movie since 2013, but at age 62, he's ready for a whole new chapter – and as he reveals, maybe even another *Spider-Man* film. "I'm hoping to find my next project very quickly," he says, "and keep it on the floor, as they say. I feel invigorated by this movie."

**How are you feeling at this point in the process?**

I feel very good. When we started, we had a deadline to start shooting with a script that I didn't really have anything to do with. And [screenwriter] Michael Waldron,



[producer] Richie Palmer, the team at Marvel, and myself pretty much had to jump in and start over. I was very rushed and panicked – a lot of trepidation. But we kept working through it. And for us, the Covid delays were a blessing because it bought us more time to work on the script. We eventually got to the point where we had started shooting, even though we were still working on the script, and it went really well. Now I feel much more relieved. That part of the process is behind us.

**WandaVision was supposed to come after this movie, which shifted some of the story and continuity. How did those changes work?**

I'm not really sure what the *WandaVision* schedule was or how it changed. I just know that halfway or maybe three-quarters of the way into our writing process, I'd first heard of this show they were doing and that we would have to follow it. Therefore, we had to really study what *WandaVision* was doing, so we could have a proper through line and character-growth dynamic. I never even saw all of *WandaVision*; I've just seen key moments of some episodes that I was told directly impact our storyline.

**There's always a larger plan at work in the MCU. How much creative freedom did you have?** Well, let me say – and this may sound like I'm talking out of both sides of my mouth – that Marvel allowed me complete creative freedom. However, it had to follow so many things in Marvel lore, that even though I had complete freedom, the previous movies and where Marvel wants to go in the future really directed the path in an incredibly specific way. Within those parameters I have freedom, but I've got to tell the story of those characters in a way that ties in with all of the properties simultaneously. We had to make sure, for instance, that Doctor Strange didn't know more than he had learned about the multiverse from *No Way Home*. And yet we had to make sure he wasn't ignorant of things that he had already learned. So everything



**“It’s probably the most complex movie I’ve ever had anything to do with”**

was dictated by what had become before.

**Spider-Man: No Way Home was also originally supposed to be after this movie, right?** Yes, it was all on the fly. “Now this is happening. Now that’s happening.” It was a fun juggling game. I guess it must be like that for the directors and writers of these very big Marvel properties that now have a long history. It was a very chaotic, wonderful, creative – I don’t want to use this word “mess,” because that’s unfair – but it was just a cascade of ideas. We’d take the best ones and quickly

weave together the fabric of this universe. It was very exciting.

**Do you feel like audiences have a certain desensitisation to this type of fantastic spectacle now — that you have to keep upping the ante?**

I think that’s been true for every filmmaker in every decade. When *King Kong* came out [in 1933], a lot of filmmakers must’ve had heart attacks. I mean, I’d watch a movie like *E.T.* when it first came out and think, “Oh, my God, what am I doing in this business? I’ll never make a movie that brilliant.” But as filmmakers, we’re also inspired. As much as it is a terrifying prospect to see something like that, it also sends a message that it’s possible. And I think filmmakers turn to new technologies, new ideas. There’s always ways to up the game.

**Still, from the very first shot of Evil Dead, you could tell that there was something unique. No one moves the camera like you. Where did that come from?** It came from limitations and trying to solve them. With *Evil Dead*, we couldn’t build the monster – so we had to just use its point of view. And we tried to add

as much strangeness to that point of view as possible, because the audience would use whatever was given them there to build their own monster in their head. So we put a big, wide lens on the camera to make it distorted around the edges. We put it on a stick that we could raise up and lower down over objects – it was literally flying. Other times I would tape it to my hand and wave my arm up and down as I was running, trying to keep it as smooth and eerie as possible. I guess we learned our most important filmmaking lesson, which is the audience can always create something in their mind more effectively than we can show them. We just have to provide the right tools for them to build that monster.

**You’ve said you had concerns about taking this movie on, because of your Spider-Man 3 experience and some of the negative reactions to that film.** Yeah, because these characters are so beloved, and you’ve got to tread very carefully. I have a sense of the absurd that maybe people don’t want to see applied to their most-beloved superheroes. You’ve



## LIFE'S WORK

Filmmaking is a passion for Raimi



got to step gingerly when working with iconic characters. So, for a time I thought, maybe it's best that I don't mix with these much-beloved characters. I don't want to be untrue to them or myself.

And then I got a call from my agent, saying, "There's an opening on *Doctor Strange 2*, are you interested?" I just said, "What the hell? Yeah, let's make it." I love *Doctor Strange*. The first movie was great, very original. I was intrigued with Benedict Cumberbatch, and I realised, "Oh, Kevin Feige is now the head of Marvel?" So I would work for a boss that I respected. All those things had a big hand in it.

**Kevin Feige worked on your *Spider-Man* movies. What do you remember of him back then?** He was a hardworking young man who was working closely with Avi Arad, who was the head of Marvel. Kevin was always there doing work behind the scenes and on set. Thank goodness I was nice to the kid!

**Did you see this *Doctor Strange* movie as a sort of redemption after *Spider-Man 3*? There are many enjoyable things about that movie, by the way,**

**though you've said some awful things about it.**

I know. It was a very painful experience for me. I wanted to make a *Spider-Man* movie to redeem myself for that. [The aborted] *Spider-Man 4* — that was really what that was about. I wanted to go out on a high note. I didn't want to just make another one that pretty much worked. I had a really high standard in my mind. And I didn't think I could get that script to the level that I was hoping for by that start date.

**So, then, what's this movie about for you?**

This one's really more about having enjoyed the Marvel movies quite a bit and wondering, "Do I still have what it takes to be able to make those?" And it's like, "Yes, I do have it in me. I'm going to show those kids how to make a superhero picture." [Laughs.] I'm joking. I remember how hard it was — it's like a marathon. But it did have something to do with it.

**What do you miss most from the *Spider-Man* movie that you never made?**

I miss the really great cameo we had designed for Bruce Campbell.

The rumour was that he was

**"I love Doctor Strange. The first movie was great, very original"**

**supposed to play Mysterio.**

That was one of the possibilities. We had other things in mind, too. And I missed Kraven the Hunter. We were going to work that character into the next *Spider-Man*; I always wanted to see Kraven fight Spider-Man on the big screen. I thought that would be really unique. He's the ultimate hunter, and Spider-Man is like the most agile trickster of the skies. And I wanted to see Peter continue forward as a human being.

**From the stuff that was beloved to the stuff that was not so beloved — what lessons did you take from that *Spider-***

***Man* trilogy when you went into *Multiverse of Madness*?**

Oh, that's a good question. I guess the lesson would be: really follow what you believe in. I think if I had done that a little bit more in the end, then [*Spider-Man 3*] would've been a little better.

**Can one do that in the context of Hollywood? Is that possible?**

Yes. But sometimes it gets very difficult. By the time that *Spider-Man 3* was in preproduction, I think Sony was aware that "Wait a minute, this is an asset of ours now. This is a big income-generating thing. This can't go unsupervised. This needs to be controlled." I think that had something to do with it.

**Tobey Maguire's *Spider-Man* is back as part of the Marvel multiverse thanks to *No Way Home*. So would you be open to making some version of a *Spider-Man* movie again, after all this time?**

If there was a great story there, I think it'd be... my love for the characters hasn't diminished one iota. It would be the same things that would stop me now that stopped me then: "Does Tobey want to do it? Is there an emotional arc for him? Is there a great conflict for this character? And is there a worthy villain that fits into the theme of the piece?" There's a lot of questions that would have to be answered. If those could be answered, then I'd love to.

**Part of what made your *Spider-Man* movies work is that they really were Peter Parker's story — and the simplicity, humanity, and sweetness of the love story, which wasn't necessarily what people expected from you.**

That was something that I always found so appealing in Stan Lee's *Spider-Man* comic books: that Peter Parker had a love story going on. And in fact, there were two different women that he was interested in over the course of his series. But I remember as a kid thinking 'I've got to get the next *Spider-Man* comic book, because I'm really into the romance of it.' Not that I would tell the other



boys at school, because I was embarrassed.

**I'm not sure everyone realises that you and Stan Lee went around trying to get a Thor movie made way back in the early 90s. What were those experiences like?**

They were great. We worked on a story based on his Thor stories, then we took it around to pitch to the different studios – and I couldn't believe that they didn't regard [Lee] more highly back then. This was probably 1991 or something, and he was treated like just another writer. "Oh, great. You write comic books. Big deal." I remember going to eight different studios, and then looking at eight different rejection slips, saying "How could they say no to this?" They'd say things like, "People are kind of touchy about their gods," and I'd go, "Yes, but it's not like a religious picture. He's the God of Thunder!" They so didn't get it.

**It was around that time that you'd said you were worried about being too associated with genre material, and then**

**you made several movies, like *A Simple Plan*, that were far less genre-driven. In your mind, did you think you were moving beyond the types of movies you'd made earlier in your career for ever?**

I mean, if I said I thought a certain type of genre was trapping me, I didn't mean to say that. I've always looked at genre films as the place where I can get another job when things go bad. I can keep telling stories there. But I do remember after *Army of Darkness* came out, a reporter saying to me, "Is this going to be your last movie, because you seem to be just doing all the same old tricks." I just went, "Oh, my God, really?"

And so, it was after that I thought, 'I don't want to be doing the same old tricks. I want to be trying to do new things.' I tried to branch out, doing different things that I hadn't done before – like a Western [1995's *The Quick and the Dead*], or a crime thriller, or other things that just hadn't occurred to me to do. That's really why I made those films in the 90s, from all those different genres. I was trying

to stretch and learn and grow as a storyteller.

**It did seem like you were trying a number of different techniques for that run of four movies [from *The Quick and the Dead* to 2000's *The Gift*] a lot of times.**

That's exactly right. I thought, "I'm not going to rely on the camera to be flashy or splashy. I'm going to make the audience invest in these characters. I've got to learn more about how to tell a story not just through the lens, but

**"I don't want to be doing the same old tricks. I want to be trying new things"**

through people." And I learned a lot of that from working with great actors: Billy Bob Thornton, Bill Paxton, Bridget Fonda, Cate Blanchett, Kevin Costner, Gene Hackman.

By the time I applied for the job on the first *Spider-Man*, I finally had 10 years of experience working like that – and thank goodness, because those *Spider-Man* movies and *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* took everything I knew about filmmaking, from directing actors to knowing visual effects. It taxed every field of learning that I have had the wonderful opportunity to experience in this industry.

**So what, overall, was the hardest part of making this new movie?**

I think the hardest part was the time deadlines, not having the story or the script... not knowing what the ending was halfway into it. Michael's trying to stay a couple of days ahead of us with the next page coming out of his computer printer, and it's hard because you want to make sure that everything is supporting the whole, that the themes are running through the picture. But when you don't quite know everything about the picture, it's hard to do that job as effectively as possible.

**Let's say there's a character from another universe – say, the Marvel movies that Fox did – who suddenly shows up in the movie, if indeed that's true. That's very exciting for the audience, but it feels like that excitement of recognition could push you out of the story. How do you balance that?**

I think if that situation appears, sometimes the best answer is to just let the character who's experiencing this new character react truthfully. Now, if there was a famous character from another universe that appeared in *Multiverse of Madness*, I'm not sure that our Doctor Strange would even know who he was; he might blow him off and not make it any big deal at all. I think a truthful response can sometimes be the funniest or the most engaging for



**ON SET**  
Making a point  
to Benedict  
Cumberbatch





**HORROR**  
Directing *Drag Me to Hell*  
which came  
out in 2009

an audience. You put them in a position like, “Man, you don’t know who *that guy* is? Oh, my God!” It’s like if some schmo was meeting James Bond onscreen for the first time, and said, “Buddy, you’ll have the martini the way I serve it. Get me?” “Don’t you know that’s James Bond?!” That’s a different kind of fun for the audience to have.

**You bounced from *Spider-Man 3* into *Drag Me to Hell* [a highly underrated 2009 horror movie], and then there was *Oz the Great and Powerful* [a riff on L. Frank Baum’s *Oz* characters]. That was in 2013 — and this is your first film since then. Were you planning to retire at that point?**

No, I just couldn’t find a script that I really loved. I didn’t feel passionately about something enough to direct it as a feature film. It was a long time, and it was unpleasant. I really do love directing. It’s all I really know how to do.

**When did you realise you wanted to become a filmmaker professionally?**

I think it was when I was in 10th

grade and met Bruce Campbell and these four guys that were all making these Super 8 movies. And it was like, ‘Oh, my gosh, these guys get together every weekend. They’ve got partners. Somebody can film. Somebody can throw the pie. Somebody can take the pie in the face. This is everything we need.’ One kid had costumes, like two suit jackets from a garage sale. Another kid had a tripod, and I thought, ‘It’s possible. I can join up with these guys, and they have similar interests.’ That really was a giant advantage for me to find somebody else after making movies for three years on my own from the age of, like, 12. Suddenly I actually could take it on as something that I wanted to do for the rest of my life. It seemed possible at that point.

**Before you ever made a directly comic-book-influenced movie, to what extent did comic books influence the way that you approach filmmaking?**

They were always a tremendous influence on me, especially all the great artists from Marvel comic books or the DC comic books. I read them as a kid constantly. And

## “I got a lot of my love of filmmaking indirectly from my brother, Sander”

when it came time to design shots for the movies that I was making, I naturally went to the only illustration story system that I was aware of, which were comic books.

**When you’re directing a gigantic movie like *Multiverse* again, are you still working from a certain muscle memory that you built up from when you were making movies for fun?**

Not as much as I should be. Because that’s what I should be doing with every shot and every moment, thinking ‘What’s the best technique?’ Not simply ‘We’ve got to make the schedule, put it on a crane.’ I know it can

work from there. It may not be the absolute best choice, but we’ve got to keep momentum going for this unit, because I’ve got to get off this stage by five o’clock today, and they’re going to tear it down.

**You suffered a terrible loss in your family when you were young. How did losing your older brother affect you?**

That was my brother Sander, and he was a great inspiration to me. He’s the one that first showed me *Spider-Man* comic books. And he was a magician on the side. I remember he would perform at kids’ parties. And I learned a lot of my desire to perform from him. So he had a tremendous influence on me. He passed away when he was only 16 years old. I was 10 at the time. So I didn’t get to know him as well as I wish I could have. But he was a super-positive role model for me.

And I feel like in his absence, I pushed more into the field of magic to try and provide for my parents what they had lost in him. And that love of magic was very similar to my love of filmmaking. When I started to move out of magic, I moved into filmmaking, another way to manipulate time and space and entertain the audience and mystify them and throw them. So I think I got a lot of my love of filmmaking indirectly from my brother, Sander.

**You were also pretty skilled as a stage illusionist, right?**

I would perform at county fairs — not even state fairs, *county fairs* — and kids’ parties, where it’s like 23 of these little monsters in front of me. I would perform a magician’s repertoire of illusions, and I’d make balloon animals, and try as hard as I could to get out of there before the last balloon animal was given out, because by then the first kid pops their balloon and they want another one. You can end up getting caught at a kid’s party, making balloon animals for like two hours if you don’t do it efficiently and quickly, then pack up and get out.

**Is there a metaphor in there somewhere?**

[Laughs] I don’t know. I don’t know. You’ll have to find it. ☺





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**PUCHEROS ATÓMICOS · GRAN AMANT · LOS DOS · AINA LOSANGE · VIK.T**

SATURDAY 25

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SUNDAY 26

**MUSE**  
**JUSTICE · METRONOMY · MILKY CHANCE**  
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**SPOTLIGHT**

# Anitta: Brazil's Fearless, Fun Superstar

**O**NE DAY IN MARCH, Anitta woke up, groggy and a little hungover, and found out she was the biggest artist in the world. Her slinky, sex-positive song 'Envolver' had just topped Spotify's global charts, making her the first Brazilian artist to ever reach that spot with a solo single.

"My cellphone is going crazy," Anitta says on a Zoom call from Rio later that day, flashing a radiant smile and sounding a little breathless from all the excitement. "It's in all the newspapers, the TV news, everything. The whole country is literally, like, stopped." She was rehearsing for Coachella, where she would again make history, as the first Brazilian artist to perform on the festival's main stage, and preparing to release her new album, *Versions of Me*.

The album, more than three years in the making, is an ecstatic, trilingual synthesis of global sounds – fearless, fun, and audacious, like Anitta herself. Many of the songs were inspired by her adventures – and misadventures – in love, sex, and romance. "I like to write about something that's in my head in the moment, and I change boyfriends as much as I change my panties," she says. "I fall in love so quick, and I just forget them even faster."

Anitta's refreshingly open, completely unfiltered personality has made her such a beloved figure in Brazil that people have urged her to run for president, and she's spoken out against the country's conservative leader, Jair Bolsonaro. "I'm doing a campaign for the young people to register to vote," she says. "That's how we're going to take this motherfucking president out of the command of the country, because we don't deserve this shit."

Anitta never minces words, and it's part of what makes *Versions of Me* feel so liberated. "I made this album thinking of me," she says. "I hate expectations, so I don't think about it. If I love it, it's good. I don't need anyone else to love it." JULYSSA LOPEZ

"I made this album thinking of me. If I love it, it's good. I don't need anyone else to love it"

**Outspoken** Anitta at a rehearsal space in Rio











Wesley Joseph



Jacob Banks

CoN&KwAke



Flo



Congee

## Jacob Banks

As Jacob Banks gears up to release his second album, *Lies About the War*, the acclaimed R&B star says he has mined new depths on this record.

"With everything happening in the world over the past two years or so, I consistently found myself in a space [where] I felt powerless," he said. "This was a new feeling, but in a way, I found a new type of power in the understanding that what's for me will always be for me if I stay ready."

## Rachel Chinouriri

Listen to Rachel Chinouriri's recent single 'All I Ever Asked' and you'll soon realise why the Croydon star is one of the most promising indie/soul voices in the UK.

This song in particular pits her dreamy vocals against synth-backed soundscapes for a sun-

soaked tale of realising your own worth in a relationship. It's the break-up anthem we've all been yearning for.

## Congee

Before stepping out as Congee, Londoner Sam Tsang had amassed an impressive list of production credits from working with Fred Again, Ed Sheeran, Sigrid, Griff and an upcoming collab with The 1975.

Tsang's debut track 'Be Alright' — inspired by his mother — proves that he is an emotional force to be reckoned with in his own right.

"This song touches on the relationship between me and Mum," he says. "She was born in China and moved here when she was a teenager not knowing a word of English."

The record is a potent testament to their unbreakable bond.

## Lynks

Lynks is the alter ego of Elliot Brett, the Bristol-born musician spearheading a new guard of artists making boundary-smashing, queer industrial pop.

Behind the colourful balaclavas lies a supreme talent whose live shows blend performance art with drag. Recent track 'Hey Joe (Relax)' is an

unrepentant ode to the power of having second thoughts about a lover.

## Flo

On debut single 'Cardboard Box', London girl group Flo offer a welcome throwback to the golden era of R&B-tinged pop from the early 00s. The Island signees, made up of 19-and-20-year-olds Renée, Stella and Jorja, are primed for stardom.

## Wesley Joseph

Wesley Joseph's musical career began back in 2011 as part of Birmingham's OG Horse collective, which counted Jorja Smith as an original member. But

his solo work is proving to be his defining voice, with recent track 'Cold Summer' showing that he's a deft hand at stunning tunes that pit alternative hip hop/R&B against personal lyrics of toil and triumph.

## Sarah Meth

Hotly tipped Londoner Sarah Meth offers distinctive tunes that explore the reality of doomed romances in a city that "pulses throughout the night as the pulse of the relationship diminishes". Recent track 'Blue' is a standout.

## THUMPER

On debut album *Delusions of Grandeur*,

Dublin six-piece THUMPER produce an uncompromising wall of sound that hits you in the face from its first notes. And no wonder, as the group boasts two drummers and three guitarists. An essential listen for fans of My Bloody Valentine.

## Cathy Jain

Cathy Jain might have recorded her debut EP *Artificial* in her bedroom, but its sounds transcend those four walls. With flavours of Billie Eilish, Frank Ocean and a wisdom far beyond her 17 years, it's an impressive starting point.

## CoN&KwAke

Melding contemporary sounds with hip-hop and spoken word, this new project is the work of Kwake, the musical director for Kae Tempest and Sampha, and Con (aka Confucius MC), who has been embedded in the UK hip-hop scene since the early 00s. Jazz collectives don't come more esteemed than this duo.



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# Beyond the Bricks of Burn



**“The real impetus to pursue change was when my mother died. That was figurative of what it’s like to never find your own voice”**





# Her own woman

*It took her mother's death for Bristol-born singer Yola to finally pursue her dreams. After conquering the US, she will soon appear in upcoming film, Elvis*

BY NICK REILLY

**I**T'S A grey, overcast morning in the southern US state of Arkansas when Yolanda Quartey picks up the phone to Rolling Stone UK from her tour bus.

The singer more commonly known as Yola is midway through her extensive US tour and is understandably struggling to deal with the way that some states can quite easily blend into each other when you're spending a lengthy amount of time on the road.

"This is a really big country and we're just continuing to move around it," she jokes.

This experience of a large-scale US tour is testament to the curious position in which the Bristol-born singer finds herself in 2022. She might not be a household name in the UK just yet, but across the pond she has become one of the most acclaimed voices in Americana.

The 38-year-old's first solo album, 2019's *Walk Through Fire*, was produced by The Black Keys' Dan Auerbach and went on to bag four Grammy nominations. Its 2021 follow-up, the defiant *Stand*

*for Myself* scored a nod for Best Americana album.

And as the title of that second record suggests, it is the story of an artist who delivered hours of hard graft before finding success as a solo act. She previously spent time in the Bristol band Phantom Limb and as a touring vocalist with fellow Bristolians Massive Attack before stepping out in her own right for the first time in 2016.

"What happens in human life is that you make so many mistakes through your 20s and you've absolutely rinsed all the ways you can get something wrong in regards to your personal boundaries," she says of *Stand for Myself's* defiant title.

"I was in an environment that told me my best role was being in service to other people's visions, careers and success, that me being the leader wasn't something that commonly happened, being the singer, songwriter and general visionary, so I should probably step away from that," she explains.

She also speaks of her terse relationship with her late mother and how her funeral, back in 2013, provided the unexpected wake-up call she needed.

"The real impetus to pursue change was when my mother died of motor neurone disease, which is like dying from the outside in," she says.

"I felt as though that was somehow figurative of what it's like to never self-actualise and get to that point of finding your own voice or fully expressing it. I think

that scared me stiff into not beating around the bush myself and going for it."

But that newfound sense of self-actualisation almost came to an abrupt end a year later, when she found herself in a house fire that almost claimed her life. She lived to tell the terrifying tale, which in fairness, provided one hell of a debut album title.

"I was burning alive and I realised that 18 months ago, I didn't like my life," she says. "But I had made those changes and now I liked my life and I hadn't been able to say that before. It gave me a great sense of optimism and I was laughing that I would take my life at that point. I laughed so hard I laughed myself out of shock. I was burning, I was a human torch and in this moment of laughter I was in shock and not doing anything. The laughter broke me out of it and that's why I'm alive."

Her next big moment will come later this year when she appears as Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the godmother of rock'n'roll, in Baz Luhrmann's anticipated *Elvis*

biopic, which stars Austin Butler as The King.

"That's just one part of the myriad of things I wouldn't have been able to do if I hadn't changed my life," she says.


She initially auditioned just to provide Tharpe's vocals for the film, but Luhrmann, who famously records all his scores before filming commences, felt like Yola was destined for bigger things than the vocal booth.

"I went in and Baz's nose was pressed right up against the vocal glass, and he'd be directing you, for all intents and purposes," she recalls.

Once again, her past experience helped. Before finding fame, Yola worked in the field of sample replay, where artists hoping to sample a classic track take the less costly option of getting a singer to re-record the sample and use that instead.

For Yola, this past experience allowed her to fully inhabit the character of Tharpe.

"Baz was eyeballing me and it essentially became a screen test; he was seeing if I could do the part," she recalls. "But I got a call later and they told me, 'You've got the part. No one else has come close in look, matched your ability to pivot and your dance skills.' My ability to work and flog it through the years just really helped me out."

And it is this arduous long game, you sense, that has ultimately allowed Yola to arrive and stand for herself. 

**"I was in an environment that told me my best role was being in service to other people's success"**



# Creating a stir

*Lockdown brought Porridge Radio's ascent to a halt. But now, with sold-out shows and festival dates, they're back on track*

**I**N MARCH 2020, Porridge Radio released their barnstorming second album *Every Bad* and were gaining momentum as the buzziest band around. So when the world ground to a halt just a week later, all Dana Margolin could think to do was laugh.

"We were being told that something was happening for us but had no physical way to connect to it," she reflects today in London. "I need to see something and touch it and feel it to understand it, so when we got nominated for the Mercury Prize, I just thought it was really funny. We went from being this chaotic DIY band to the kind of band we'd always laughed at, the 'Hot New Band Plays Indie Showcase' thing."

Around that time, Margolin wrote 'Back to the Radio', the

gargantuan first single from *Every Bad* follow-up *Waterslide, Diving Board, Ladder to the Sky*. Reflecting on the rising tide of hype outside her door and the sense that her life was soon going to change immeasurably, it's a song that not only helped to shelter Margolin from the whiplash-like change coming round the corner, but also to embrace it with both arms.

The result is a cast-iron indie-rock hit that's set to ensure Porridge Radio's star continues to rise. "You're looking to me, but I'm so unprepared for it," she sings on the unabashedly anthemic song, which points to The Killers, Arcade Fire and other stadium-dwellers for inspiration.

Porridge Radio's genesis came as a rough-and-ready, lo-fi, DIY act in Brighton, starting with Margolin alone in her bedroom and at open-mic nights, before growing to incorporate a six-piece band,

which has now shrunk to a deeply connected, permanent four. Even when they were recording at home out of necessity and embracing their rougher edges, Margolin imagined a booming, polished sound for the band, and *Waterslide, Diving Board, Ladder to the Sky* finally sees the ambition that's always been in her head translated onto tape.

"During the mixing process, I kept saying that it all needed to sound 'stadium epic' and was referencing Coldplay and Radiohead and Charli XCX and Deftones," she says, excitedly. This level of pure ambition bursts out of the new record: it truly sounds like a band aiming for the very top.

Although the album has its climactic, arena-ready moments – 'Back to the Radio', the gnarly 'The Rip', widescreen highlight 'U Can Be Happy If U Want To' – Margolin has also allowed herself to be vulnerable, gentle and quiet. This marks a shift from *Every Bad*,

which often saw her shouting, sometimes screaming, to make herself heard.

The change of pace comes across most strikingly on the album's title track, a delicate, acoustic number Margolin penned in her childhood bedroom while recovering from an illness at home with her parents. "It just kind of came out," she remembers. "It was really soft and gentle, and I often shy away from that kind of thing. I found it really healing and restorative."

With the real-world markers of their growing success – sold-out shows, festival dates – belatedly taking place and a third album in progress that furthers the singular vision that made the world fall for them in the first place, Porridge Radio's status as a band to treasure is certain.

"Over the last few years," Margolin reflects, "I've come to understand what I'm doing in my life and where I'm going. I can see myself as an artist and actually say it out loud and accept it without just laughing." **WILL RICHARDS**

**IN TUNE**  
(Left to right)  
Maddie  
Ryall, Sam  
Yardley, Dana  
Margolin and  
Georgie Stott

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PHILOSOPHY

# Inside the Metaphysical Mind of Natasha Lyonne

*Her show Russian Doll plumbs the depths of existence. Here's what it's taught her about life*

BY ELISABETH GARBBER-PAUL

**I**'M DEEPLY CRACKED from a combination of Talmud and LSD," says Natasha Lyonne, flicking a cigarette in her hand from the couch of her Los Angeles home, where she's been chatting by Zoom for over an hour. She is attempting to explain the underpinnings of her show *Russian Doll*, a metaphysical mindfuck she writes, produces and stars in, whose second season recently dropped on Netflix.

Based on a character Lyonne had long imagined – essentially a hard-partying, alternative-reality version of herself named Nadia – the series explores the nature of life and death, goodness and regret, of memory, ghosts, family, and the New York City she loves. It is both extremely personal and universal. And also, because it's Lyonne, it's fucking hilarious.

Without Lyonne's vast swath of experiences – an intense early education at a Jewish yeshiva, where she learned about the Torah and the Talmud; time as an East Village junkie, seeing how much of that education she could forget – she probably wouldn't have had the range for, or the interest in, building such an intricate, multi-planed universe. In fact, it was in rehab

that she became deeply interested in the metaphysical aspects of existence. "The thing that was most challenging for me, getting clean, is that you're supposed to rearrange your relationship to earthly things, so that you're not constantly being like, 'Oh, let me go smoke dope,'" she says. "Where a lot of people find comfort in church, I started reading a lot of science books, and finding comfort there." She devoured Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* and Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*. "It just made me walk into the world differently and think about all the things that I didn't know, which felt very grounding."

In *Russian Doll*, Lyonne revisits these themes with the help of a very qualified writers' room ("these fucking brilliant women, just fucking Ivy League geniuses"), creating a show that questions not only the world but also our place within it. If season one was largely based on the cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter's *I Am a Strange Loop*, the time travel that defines the new episodes comes from physicist Carlo

Rovelli's *The Order of Time*. "It's really smacking wide open this idea of 'What if the nature of time is not as we experience it?'" Lyonne explains. "It's just fun as hell."

With all her accumulated expertise, we asked Lyonne to drop some knowledge on building the show's world – and understanding ours.

## How Time Travel Works (or Doesn't)

It's really just asking the question of "What is this thing that I would go and change? What is that butterfly-effect event that I'm looking for?" We [in the writers' room] thought a lot about, 'What would the rules be? Is it just a "kill Hitler" season?' And it's like, 'Well, of course, we all want to kill Hitler.' But assuming we could make that machine, would you actually be able to do things like that? Nadia's not actually the centre of the universe, she's just another bozo on the bus. For her and [fellow time looper] Alan, it really feels like the most you want to have them be able to do is handle their own case in a way, or at least try and fail to handle their own case but come away with a deeper understanding of what it is to be alive on the other side, having walked through that epigenetic footprint that was mapped onto them in a way where now they see

their own trip differently, so that they can possibly be set up to enjoy the ride. It is pretty philosophical – therapeutic by way of quantum physics and high concept and multiverse, and time travel, and death loops and all these things.

## Addressing the Big Questions

"How do we know we exist?" I think the bigger question is "Does it matter if we don't?" That sort of speaks to [the idea of us living in a] multiverse simulation as well, which is where, as a storyteller, I philosophically deviate from something that truly ends in magic. Because in a way it doesn't matter; it doesn't matter if the concept of karma is not real. Does it not seem that it would still be a life better lived to do unto others [as they would do to you]? Is it not helpful to think that it's better to not be a total fucking piece of shit in your daily dealings, and expect to have a lovely life and people that care about you? Probably wise to show up with some empathy in a life, even if life has no meaning. Even if none of this is anything, we've still got to go through it.

Essentially, I guess the questions that I'm always talking to my friends about, or in the books or movies that I'm curious about, are what is the game? And do we have the game all wrong? And why does it cause us suffering? And it's, of course, because we live in this material world – I don't mean financial; I mean, we actually are of this world. Whether we can





**Probably wise to show up with some empathy in a life, even if life has no meaning. Even if none of this is anything, we've still got to go through it**







## ON REPEAT

Lyonne stars as a woman trapped in a time loop; (below) Greta Lee co-stars as Nadia's best friend Maxine

see past it or beyond it or whatever doesn't change the fact that we all have bills, and relationships, parents, and we've got these weird bodies that we carry around and stuff. So there is no idea that actually will take you past all those things in the day [you're] in. So, I think it's a show that wants to pose those big questions without getting into full magic. Because if they stay in their lives, hopefully altered in some tangible way that they can actually do something with them, that's not full magic, you know?

## More Than Soup for the Soul

I'm 42. I don't know if exercising is really going to make much impact on my vibe. I'm just big hair and sunglasses. It's not [like] I'm running marathons or something, I'm doing low-level calisthenics. [But] not doing that for a solid week, it makes my body feel rickety. And if I just stand up and do these stretches and a little fucking jog or whatever, I'm going to have a better night's sleep and wake up the next day and be like, "Guess whose trousers fit?"

I think that the condition of one's soul is not dissimilar. The less I treat that thing and the more I say, "Do I even exist?" ... [If I'm like,] "Well,

fuck it, I'm not participating at all, fuck this whole thing they call life," I still have to be alive and have an experience that is increasingly disconnected and dejected and nihilistic. And I might feel really cool doing it – like, "Boy, is this a tough aesthetic" – but ultimately, in my experience, somewhat sadder and [more] lonely for it. At the age I am, I don't find that aesthetic to be quite so hip as I used to any more.

## Evidence There's a Metaverse

Maybe I come at all of this from more of a spiritual level. In my experience, if I'm in a really shady mood, I come out of the house, I'm in a rush, and I go to hail a taxi, and it's raining, and there's no taxis there; and now I'm walking in the middle of the street, turned backwards to traffic, just looking for taxis, and I'm getting poured on; and I pull out my phone, and I try to click on Uber, but the account just doesn't work; I ordered the car, but it didn't even come, and so now I'm on my way to the subway; but there's fucking yellow tape there for some reason, that [entrance] is closed, [so I have to] walk three blocks over here. Now, I may as well just walk the full distance. I don't

know what happened, but it's officially a shitty fucking day. Another day, I just walk outside. Everything's there, I'm making the deli guy laugh while I'm ordering my coffee. I walk out of the deli, boom, there's a taxi. I actually get [to where I'm going] a little bit early, and something funny happens outside the building right before I walk in. I don't know what that is, but I do think that it's curious. It seems like at any moment there's multiple universes you can tap into and that's going to shift how your day goes.


## String Theory Explained, Sort Of

It's possible that we're just not seeing things correctly, and that our entire sense of the history of the universe is incorrect. I think that [string theory] really is, essentially, opening up a possibility that the world as we know it is not quite so limited. From there, it becomes a question of what we can do with all that information, what it's going to mean for the future of existence as we know it. There's a lot of questions now about building quantum computers and stuff, which



would be a measure of fallout. I mean, I'm ultimately the wrong person to be asking about these things. You'd be better off asking scientists.

## On Where We Go When We Die

I'm some schnook from the block or whatever, but I'm collaborating with people who can really wrap themselves around these concepts more tangibly. Do you have to fucking sit with some angel of death and play chess? Is it [like] Albert Brooks [in *Defending Your Life*] and you're going to be looking down at your fucking mistakes? Do you have to run into your fucking parents in the afterlife? I am genuinely spooked by a lot of these concepts, so I'm just curious to go swimming around in them and see what's what. 

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# Welcome to the Great Pinocchio Revival of 2022

IT'S NO LIE: Somehow, there are three new adaptations of *Pinocchio*, the 1883 Italian novel about a wooden puppet who just wants to be a real boy, hitting the big screen this year. Which is for you? Take your pick... MARIA FONTOURA

## Pinocchio: A True Story

## Disney's Pinocchio

## Pinocchio

### How to Watch

DVD and VOD available now

Releasing to Disney+ in September 2022

In cinemas and on Netflix in December

### Format

Animated

Live-action computer animation (think: *Space Jam* or *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*)

Stop-motion animation (think: *Coraline*)

### Director

Vasilyi Rovenskiy

Robert Zemeckis

Guillermo del Toro

### Star Power

90s icon **Pauly Shore** voices Pinocchio, while *Napoleon Dynamite*'s Jon Heder is his horse, Tybalt.

Tom Hanks as Geppetto, Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Jiminy Cricket, **Cynthia Erivo** as the Blue Fairy, Lorraine Bracco as new character Sofia the Seagull, and more.

Ewan McGregor as Jiminy Cricket and Tilda Swinton as "The Fairy With the Turquoise Hair." Plus: Cate Blanchett, John Turturro, Ron Perlman, Tim Blake Nelson, and Christoph Waltz.

### What's the Take?

The classic tale retooled as a PG love story with updated references to pop-culture ephemera like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, slapstick comedy, and a whiny version of a tweenish Pinocchio.

A shiny new coat of paint on the family-friendly original, which will likely be an impressive blend of CGI and capital-A acting. Plus: new music by composer Alan Silvestri and pop producer Glen Ballard.

In typical del Toro style, a dark retelling set against the backdrop of the rise of fascism in 30s Italy. The director has said that he is taking inspiration from **Frankenstein**.

### Sign of Trouble?

Made and first released in **Russia**, the film earned such IMDb reviews as "The story is boring" and "Worst movie ever. Kids were sleeping."

Zemeckis was the third director to be attached to the project over its seven years in development, using a script that went through at least four writers.

The film was mired in development for nearly 14 years, with del Toro at one point setting his budget at a stiff \$35 million that no studio wanted to cough up.

### Expectations

If the viral reaction to the trailer is any indication — Shore briefly became a TikTok darling, with creators lip-syncing to it — this *Pinocchio* has cult classic written all over it.

Zemeckis and Hanks work well: **Forrest Gump** netted them each an Oscar (plus Best Picture), while *Cast Away* got Hanks another nod.

Though this is del Toro's first animated film, he's a master storyteller whose flair for supernatural thrills is unmatched. And he says he's never felt more connected to a character.

### We Say



FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: DISNEY/ALAMY; STEVEN FERDMAN/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID M. BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES; MANDRAKETHBLACK/DE/NETFLIX; VASILIS TSIKINIS PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; LIONSGATE; EVERETT COLLECTION; 2; ADRIEN COQUET/THE NOUN PROJECT



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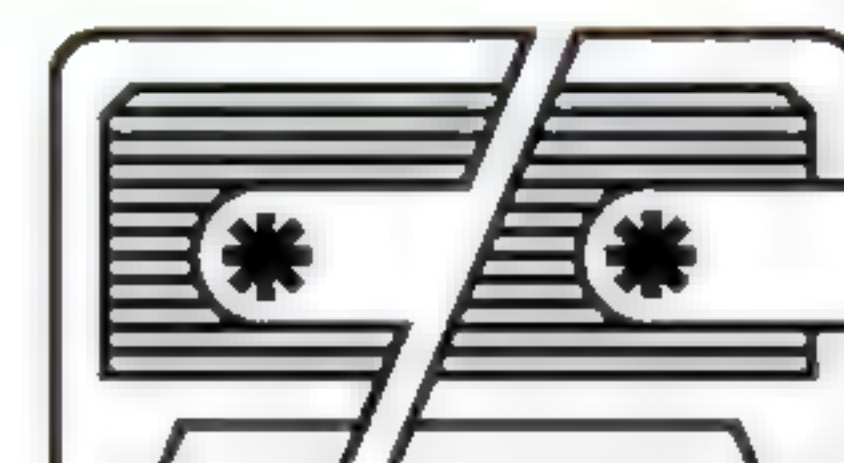
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# Strike it lucky

*Phoebe Green's switch from pure indie to deeply personal pop is the start of an exciting new chapter for the Manchester singer*

BY CHARLOTTE KROL

**W**HEN SHE was making “the indie stuff” Phoebe Green would have never believed that her future lay in being a pop star. “This would’ve been my worst fucking nightmare,” she says.

The Manchester-based soloist has fully jumped on the popturnist bandwagon she didn’t think was “cool” as a teenager. In 2016, she was writing gentle indie numbers that culminated in her debut album, *02:00 AM*, released during her A-levels.

Afterwards, Green took some time out to develop her music, eventually bridging the gap between the sounds of her earlier, guitar-spun songs and her latest material with the more buoyant indie disco ditties of 2020’s *I Can’t Cry for You* EP and other standalone singles.

With her second album, *Lucky Me*, the 24-year-old Lancashire native throws her biggest sonic development curveball yet, as industrial synths, bold beats and bass invite the listener to the dance floor.

Despite Green’s new direction, her lyrical prowess is as strong as ever. The album’s first single, ‘Make It Easy’, is just one example: “*I’ve got too much pride to set myself up for rejection / I let too many*

*opportunities slide before I lay out my intentions,*” she sings as she recalls indulging in a casual sexual relationship to protect herself against the hurt deeper commitment might bring.

Green is known for self-analytical lyrics that reflect on the complexities of her personality and, in turn, the fallibility of humankind. Born out of “a fear of being misunderstood”, it’s an openness that’s been nurtured by her close-knit family and “shitloads of therapy” she confides.

On her recent single, the album’s title track ‘Lucky Me’, Green addresses mental health directly. Challenging the ‘let’s talk’ narrative, she instead favours hedonistic escape as a means of suppressing trauma.

“Every way that I could be self-destructive, I’ve managed in some capacity,” she admits, giving a nod to the song’s mention of liquid lunches. “It definitely comes from past trauma; I have PTSD. A big coping mechanism for me is that I have to find a physical outlet that either numbs everything or takes it out of my head. It’s just way easier to focus on being self-destructive than to hurt other people. But I’ve realised that in







Given the similarities between her and Self Esteem's "unique, perspective-based" tunes that also trade in pointed, spoken-word personal and social commentary, it was perhaps little surprise that the pair hit it off. They also share the same management.

"We very much came to realise that we'd literally led the same life," Green explains. "The last night of the tour, we were talking for hours and hours. We were just telling each other our life stories and crying."

"I think that's why a lot of my songs now have a lot of speaking parts because I have so much to say that it's not going to fit into a melody," she adds.

So how does she want her new album – undoubtedly her strongest work yet – to make her fans feel?

"I definitely want people to feel like they're allowed to accept that they find emotions difficult,

## **"Every way that I could be self-destructive, I've managed in some capacity"**

being self-destructive it ruins everyone around me."

These days, her physical outlet is songwriting. On *Lucky Me*, Green was aided by her longtime friend, the producer/songwriter heavyweight Dave McCracken (Beyoncé, Florence + The Machine). After her 2020 EP left her in an emotional, "uninspired" mental funk, it was McCracken who yanked her out of it to write the album together last year.

"If Dave didn't have faith in me like that, I don't think I could have done it," Green confesses. Tom Fuller and Everything Everything's Alex Robertshaw then worked on production.

A recent UK tour supporting Self Esteem proved fertile ground for Green, who felt reinvigorated from performing live again. It also afforded her a new confidante.

because I think, a lot of the time, we're so conditioned to either suppress them or let them out in a very acceptable way," she replies.

"Feeling things can actually be revolting, it can be the most uncomfortable, distressing thing ever," she continues. "I hate being like, 'Oh, people need to accept themselves,' because I fucking don't! I'm working towards it but I'm not obsessed with myself at all – unless it's to tear myself apart."

*Lucky Me* is the start of an exciting fresh chapter for Green, who adds that she's planning to air the album's material on a headline tour later this year.

"There are obviously so many things that come with music, as they do with every career, but it's literally the best thing ever," she reflects. "It's the thing that makes me feel the most like myself, so I think I would be an idiot to not want to pursue it for ever." ®



[ TAYLOR HAWKINS, 1972-2022 ]

# The Heartbeat of the Foos

He was one of the 21st century's most beloved drummers and a flag bearer for the spirit of rock'n'roll. Then it all ended, way too soon

BY BRIAN HIATT

**I**N THE MID-80S, when Taylor Hawkins was a teenager in Laguna Beach, California, he'd drum along to his favourite records in his parents' garage so loudly that local kids got used to hearing him during soccer practice on a nearby field. Hawkins played some baseball, at the urging of a brother who "willed him" to be good at it, and surfed a bit, though not as much as his central-casting California-dude looks and lifelong fondness for going around shirtless and barefoot in board shorts would suggest. "I was never that great," he said. "Because I was always in the garage, smoking cigarettes and playing drums." He played in his high school's jazz band for a while, until they threw him out for being "too loud, too fast".

So it all came back to that garage and those records, an obsession that began when he saw a Queen concert at age 10. "My rudimental training was Rush's *Exit... Stage Left* and the Police's *Zenyatta Mondatta*," he once told *Modern Drummer*. In upscale Laguna Beach, the preppy kids were into reggae, so Hawkins would keep his unfashionable Van Halen and Queen records to himself. He never got much into punk rock, either. "I went to a hardcore show in Huntington when I was 12 or 13 and hated it," he said. "It was just really rough, and there were no girls there."

Hawkins was a true believer in the power and glory of arena rock who eventually got to see his day-to-day life become indistinguishable from rock'n'roll fantasy camp. After high school, he went from playing in a Jane's Addiction-influenced local band while working in a music store to touring big venues with the singer Sass Jordan. For Jordan, it was as much about Hawkins' obvious star power and charisma as his chops, and she left it to her musical director, Stevie Salas, to forcefully instill some of the fundamentals Hawkins missed in his self-tutelage, an experience he'd compare to the movie *Whiplash*.

From there, Alanis Morissette snatched him up for her band just as her early fame was exploding, only for Dave Grohl to grab him for Foo Fighters in 1997. With the Foos, he'd eventually get to headline stadiums and play with just about all of his heroes, from Rush's Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson to Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones to Paul McCartney. With his flamboyance and musical power, he was one of the last rock drummers to achieve stardom in his own right, taking over vocals for a song each night at Foos concerts and fronting various side projects.

Like too many rock'n'roll heroes, Hawkins died on tour, in a hotel room, in a city far from home. The Foo Fighters were supposed to play a concert that night, 25 March, in Bogota, Colombia. He was 50 years old, and left behind his wife of 17 years, Alison, and three kids, Oliver, Annabelle and Everleigh. At press time, his death was a mystery, though local authorities said various substances, including opioids, had been found in his urine, and that his heart was enlarged – a fact that Hawkins told *ROLLING STONE* last year that his doctor had noticed, but thought was harmless.

The dark side of rock stardom revealed itself early to Hawkins via what he called "my big fucking fuckup" – when he overdosed in London in 2001, leaving him in a coma for two weeks. Grohl, who founded Foo Fighters after losing Kurt Cobain to suicide just seven years earlier, stood watch by Hawkins' bedside, and said later it was the one time he thought about ending the band.

Hawkins acknowledged smoking weed after the incident, but otherwise seemed to embrace some version of sobriety, throwing his energy into mountain biking. "I've been on a reckless path for a while," he said a year after the overdose. "One thing I've realised is I do not want to become some fucking rock'n'roll cliché, selling his drums when his career's over to buy drugs. My dad always says it takes me a long time to learn my lessons, and it took me a while to work it out. My mom's an alcoholic, too, and I saw her beat herself up every day." Last year, he told *ROLLING STONE*, "I'm just lucky that I did get the message at the right time."

He also told *ROLLING STONE* that it was impossible to play Foo Fighters shows unless he was totally sober, while also acknowledging severe stage fright. "I'm in hell right now," he said in June 2021, on the day of the Foos' first real show since the pandemic started. The fact that it was a mere club warmup gig made no difference. Hawkins had been on the road for 28 years before Covid-19 hit, and he was surprised at how much he enjoyed the break from his anxieties and the chance to focus on his side projects, especially NHC, his band with Jane's Addiction's Dave Navarro and Chris Chaney: "I was feeling nice not doing anything. It's nice being a loser for a year and a half; it really was."

Grohl saw Hawkins as his "musical twin flame" and told *ROLLING STONE* last year that from the moment he met him backstage at the KROQ Weenie Roast – Hawkins was still playing with Morissette – it was "love at first sight. I instantly knew, we're gonna know each other for ever." When Hawkins initially had trouble playing in the studio, Grohl walked him through it, splitting drum duties on 1999's *There Is Nothing Left to Lose*. On the follow-up, 2002's *One by One*, Hawkins played on every song and was the band's sole drummer from that point on.

Hawkins was still daunted by the fact his band was fronted by one of rock's greatest drummers, who still picked up his sticks for their demos. At times, Hawkins admitted, he felt like "the douche little dumbshit behind him that just fucking does whatever I'm told, and tries to play 'Everlong' as good as him, and I can't." Just about everyone, even Axl Rose, would ask, "What's it like being Dave Grohl's drummer?" (He eventually came up with a good answer: "I'm rich.")

"He would be in this band even if he was half the fucking drummer he was," Grohl said, "because of who he is.... I think that he really underestimates his importance in this band. Oh, my God, what would we be without Taylor Hawkins? Could you imagine? It would just be a completely different thing." Foo Fighters were supposed to tour until December, but they cancelled every date in the wake of Hawkins' passing, and the future of the band – born out of tragedy in the first place – is unclear. Before Hawkins' death, at least, the Foos seemed to collectively imagine themselves continuing on for decades, à la the Rolling Stones. "Who knows what that's going to look like when we're all 60-plus, or older," guitarist Chris Shiflett mused in 2021.

When he was younger, Hawkins may have had a different vision of his future, musing on it in 2002. "When I'm 50," he said, "when all this nonsense is over, I want to go live in Hawaii with my family, go surfing, smoke a little pot." ®





Hawkins in 2021



# The True Price of the Cost of Living Crisis

*In the UK, we are experiencing the worst decline in living standards since the Industrial Revolution as the price of the basics – energy and food – soars, forcing more than a million people into poverty. But there is an alternative...*

BY SIMON CHILDS

**F**OR TOM SEFTON, the poverty lead at Epsom and Ewell food bank, one of the most upsetting things about his role is seeing people who clearly didn't expect to be relying on handouts turn up to ask for help for the first time. "We've got people who come to us and say, 'I've been donating to the food bank for years. I never expected to be at the receiving end of it.'"

Epsom and Ewell in the commuter belt of leafy Surrey is not the first place that springs to mind when we think about poverty. But even here, food-bank usage has surged. For the first three months of 2022, 74 per cent more people were fed by the five food banks that Sefton oversees, compared to the same period in 2019 before the pandemic hit.

Most of the people Sefton works with have had a personal crisis that they didn't have enough money to fix, but he's noticed a change recently. "The energy bills are coming up again and again," he says.

In April this year, UK households faced a record 54 per cent increase in their gas and electricity bills, after regulator Ofgem lifted the maximum rate suppliers can charge to £1,971, reflecting a fourfold increase in the market price of energy.

A mother of a family of four surviving on Universal Credit told Sefton that before Christmas their combined gas and electricity bill was £90 a month. Then it went up to £147 a month. Finally, she received a letter informing her that it would rise to £189 a month.

"Where can she get that [extra] £90 a month? Where's it going to come from? People are going to go into debt. The food bank can help people but it's not going to fill the gap," explains Sefton.

Another of Sefton's clients worked out that cooking a meal on her electric hob cost 83p. "And then she worked out how much it costs to cook a meal using a slow cooker; they were, like, 20p. She stopped using her electric hob at all, and she was now cooking all her meals in her slow cooker."

This is the cost of living crisis – rising fuel costs, rising food costs, rising everything costs – which has been dragging more people into the mire of poverty since late 2021.

According to James Meadway, economist and director of the Progressive Economy Forum, there are three main causes for this. The first is Covid: "You've got lockdowns everywhere, most people stopped working, factories shutter," meaning that manufacturing "takes this really big hit". With lockdowns memory-holed, people have hit the shops and discovered that the people who make the things they want to buy were locked down, too.

Secondly, there's extreme weather thanks to climate change. "You've got frost in Brazil which damages coffee-bean growing, floods in Canada which damage wheat growing, droughts in Taiwan which hit semiconductor manufacture." This introduces more disruption into the supply chain.

Thirdly, Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine – a major exporter of wheat and corn – impacting









**LIFELINE**  
Despite its affluent location, Epsom and Ewell Foodbank has seen a surge in the number of people living off food donations because they cannot afford to eat

com, has been advising people how to save cash on everything from switching energy providers to credit cards since 2000, but even he is out of ideas. “I’ve been through the financial crash. I’ve been through Covid... This is the worst,” he told BBC’s *Sunday Morning*, in a dramatic intervention before the government’s March Spring Statement.

“As the Money Saving Expert, I am virtually out of tools to help people now,” he said, with a note of exasperation in his voice. “It’s not something money management can fix. It’s not something with those on the lowest incomes, [that] telling them to [tighten] their belts will work. We need political intervention.”

Those looking for just that have been disappointed. When the Spring Statement came, Sunak failed to increase benefits in line with inflation. In real terms, this amounts to a cut. Analysis from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation predicts that this will mean families in poverty are £446 per year worse off in 2022-23 compared to if benefits had been uprated in line with current inflation levels. It means 600,000 people will be pulled into poverty as a result of this “inaction”, the foundation predicts.

Dave Innes, head of economics at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, said: “Security is only real if it’s for everyone. The choices the Chancellor has made today won’t deliver any security for those at the sharpest end of this crisis; instead, he has abandoned many to the threat of destitution.”

Sunak – believed to be the richest man in the House of Commons – is ideologically

## “It looks like the worst decline in living standards since the Industrial Revolution”

Thatcherite. He is instinctively against the idea that the state should solve people’s problems. Nevertheless, his inaction belies the scale of the crisis. When I ask Meadway to put things into perspective, he struggles to find a precedent that would resonate with anyone currently alive. “It looks like the worst decline in living standards since the Industrial Revolution,” he says.

Away from the food banks and the acute poverty will be a gentler form of misery. People with ordinary jobs will have to cut down on “all the nice things you’d like to do”, and instead spend your money on “your rent, your food, on heating your house”, says Meadway. “So, it’s just a really unpleasant, nasty squeeze you’ve got for most people this year. I don’t think there’s anybody alive in Britain who’s ever experienced anything that looks quite like this.”


Although it’s not something we’ve experienced before, these economic shockwaves are likely to become a feature of

our lives as climate change worsens. With that in mind, you would be forgiven for having a pretty bleak vision of the future. But does it have to be this way?

There’s no slack in the system for the poor, but there’s plenty elsewhere. “Company profits in Britain are at record highs right now. Some of the most profitable companies in the whole country are gas suppliers and electricity suppliers,” says Meadway. “There are these big environmental shocks happening, but companies are still making huge profits. So instead of them making huge profits, why not squeeze their profits and keep prices the same? This is a political decision.”

This is what has happened in France. In order to protect customers from price rises, the government has forced the state-run energy supplier EDF to take an €8.4 billion (£7 billion) hit.

As far as Sefton is concerned, there needs to be much more targeted welfare support for those on low incomes. For him, it’s pretty simple. “Most of the people I meet are trying to do the right thing in really difficult circumstances. They’re trying to give their children all the opportunities that other children have but they just aren’t able to do it.

“I think we need to have a more caring, compassionate, fair response to support people who are going through difficult times,” he continues. “That kind of happened during Covid. I hope that we can sustain some of that and have a lasting impact on how we look after people.” 



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# How Ukraine Won the Battle for Kyiv

*At the time of going to press, Russia's war on Ukraine continues to ravage the country. But it is far from the swift victory Putin no doubt anticipated. As Ukrainian resistance continues, Oz Katerji reports from deep within the Kyiv battlefield on a story that news headlines alone can't begin to scratch the surface of: how was the red beast beaten into retreat from the capital city?*

**B**EFORE RUSSIA LAUNCHED a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, intelligence assessments coming out of Washington and London were bleak about Kyiv's chances of survival. It and the rest of Ukraine were set to be outmanned, outgunned and surrounded by one of the most powerful modern military forces ever assembled, they believed.

As Russian troops were advancing on the city, US officials even offered to evacuate Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky from Kyiv, only for him to shoot back: "The fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride" in what is now one of the most famous political quotes of the 21st century.

According to reports, Moscow's plan was to encircle and capture Ukraine's capital within a matter of days before carrying out a campaign of executions of Ukrainian politicians, journalists and human rights activists. But 37 days after the invasion began, Russian forces were driven out of the Kyiv Oblast in its entirety, with Ukrainian deputy defence minister Hanna Maliar releasing a statement on 2 April that Kyiv had been liberated from Russian invaders.

Ukraine's decisive victory in the Battle for Kyiv was an audacious and impressive military accomplishment. Russia's loss in Kyiv came not only as a surprise to Moscow, but also to Ukraine's allies in western capitals. But how could Ukraine's smaller army inflict such a humiliating blow against the Russian Goliath in Kyiv when so few thought it was possible?









## BATTLING FOR THEIR HOMELAND

Previous page: A Ukrainian tank in newly liberated Irpin in the Kyiv Oblast. Above: Territorial defence volunteers in Brovary prepare food for their comrades. Asked if she was worried about the Russian offensive on Kyiv, Olena (left), 47, replied: "The sound of shelling is like a lullaby"

THE DAY BEFORE the invasion felt like any other winter's day in central Kyiv as I made my way through the throng of a bustling metropolis, the beautiful and vibrant capital of a fledgling Eastern European liberal democracy. But what followed was a night like no other. A dark foreboding hung heavy in the air as the streets emptied and bars brought down their shutters as what little hope of averting a major European war was extinguished. The cacophony of artillery fire, air strikes and air-raid sirens that erupted in the early hours of 24 February left nobody in doubt: the invasion had begun.

Within hours, makeshift barricades had been erected across the famous cobblestone streets of Kyiv's old town, and decrepit Soviet cars and shopping

trolleys were reinforced with hurriedly filled sandbags. The boutique shops and international retail brands that sit in between the ancient blue-and-gold domes of Kyiv's Orthodox churches were boarded up, and the streets that had latterly been filled with such energy and life were now deserted.

Beneath them, in old Soviet bomb shelters and miles upon miles of central Kyiv's metro network, tens of thousands of people sought shelter from the incoming Russian bombardment. A family could be found crammed into every corner of every station as – remarkably – the trains still ran. The highways were gridlocked as much of Kyiv's population fled, but, as the Russians started cutting off the main arteries out of the city, the country's railway network bravely kept

running, shuttling millions of civilians across the country to the relative safety of the west. There the new arrivals faced the uncertainty and cruelty that comes with a life displaced.

**"Overnight, the people of Kyiv organised themselves into territorial defence units"**

Those who remained in Kyiv were met with an entirely different set of problems. Long queues formed quickly at ATMs and the few food stores and pharmacies that remained open. Shelves were emptied as supplies in the city dwindled.

Very few had prepared for a military assault on Kyiv, a prospect many here thought utterly inconceivable mere hours before the first strikes landed. But as the days ground on, and



the fear of siege grew, the shelves were steadily restocked.

As we saw during the pandemic, the unsung heroes of this crisis, and of every crisis, were frontline transport and supply-chain workers who continued their labour, even in the most terrifying of conditions, even when presented with the chance to escape for their lives.

Not long after President Zelensky ordered the mass mobilisation of the Ukrainian people, garbage trucks loaded with rifles were driven into Kyiv's residential suburbs as men of fighting age armed themselves for what was to come. Seemingly overnight, the people of Kyiv had organised themselves into decentralised territorial defence units, manning checkpoints, or as the Ukrainians called them "block posts",

aiming to thwart Russian sabotage operations inside the city and, if need be, dig in and engage advancing Russian troops in a guerrilla warfare campaign.

Even in the opening hours of the war, as Russian troops approached Kyiv at lightning speed, Ukraine's resistance destroyed Putin's plans. Russia had activated assassination squads and saboteurs inside the city to take out government officials and key infrastructure targets, but the speed of Ukrainian mobilisation rooted them out and neutralised the threats quickly.

Each night in those early days of the invasion felt darker than the last. The bombardment grew louder, creeping closer to the city centre, seemingly with each passing hour. Air-raid sirens pierced the sky, a sound that was punctuated by

intermittent explosions. As the violence crept closer, Russian bombs began to fall on residential apartment buildings and shopping centres. Grippled by fear of what was to come, Kyiv's residents were glued to their phones for updates on how close Russian troops were to encircling them.

Days later, the makeshift barriers had been replaced by prefab concrete blocks and Czech anti-tank hedgehogs. Underground bunkers had emptied as most of those seeking to flee the city had now gone. The streets were now filled mostly with the men and women who had taken up arms to defend their city, and the sound of trucks loaded with concrete and sand working to reinforce Kyiv's network of barricades. In the space of a week, Kyiv transformed from a cosmopolitan European capital into a formidable fortress that, it turns out, would not be penetrated.

One thing that struck me as I travelled between Kyiv's barricades and the frontlines of the border towns in the Kyiv Oblast, was the high morale of the men and women holding the line against the invasion. Even when the headlines were dominated by the imminent arrival of a 40-mile column of Russian armoured vehicles that was snaking its way towards them, the absolute determination and steadfastness of the Ukrainian people was evident. They didn't just believe in the righteousness of their cause; they were convinced that they would win, even as the rest of the world doubted their ability and expected their defences to collapse.

As the days turned to weeks, the stories and images that emerged from the fighting raging outside Kyiv began to reinforce that confidence. That belief, the resolution and resolve, is the first reason Russia lost the Battle for Kyiv.

Vladimir Putin, cowering in his nuclear fallout bunker in the Ural Mountains, made not only a strategic error in trying to take Kyiv, but he fundamentally and fatally misunderstood the Ukrainian people and their desire to live as free citizens in a liberal democracy. While his army of conscripts and cowards, dubbed "Orcs" by Ukrainians, were brutalising and pillaging their way through civilian neighbourhoods, Ukrainians were defiantly and determinedly fighting back as free men, defending their homes and the future liberty of their children. For all the billions Putin pumped into his propaganda organs around the world, the desire for freedom remains an ideal



**ON THE OFFENSIVE**  
(Left) The writer Oz Katerji with Ukrainian territorial defence volunteers on a frontline near Hostomel; (below) A destroyed Russian armoured personnel carrier in Bucha





that no tyrant can eradicate.

Russia's military might would be further undone by its incompetence and a failure to understand its own limitations. By the second week of the war, every highway leading out of the city was fortified by miles upon miles of trenches dug alongside, with thousands of men deployed across the network, ready to attack encroaching Russian convoys. Russia would not be able to take control of the capital without meeting fierce resistance. Their armoured columns became an easy target on the narrow roads of rural Ukraine, as Ukrainian forces undertook daring ambushes, destroying hundreds of tanks and armoured vehicles along the way. At the time of writing, more than 1,400

Russian armoured vehicles have been destroyed in Ukraine.

Putin also underestimated the resolve of Ukraine's allies, who have enacted the most comprehensive sanctions campaign ever launched, damaging Russia's ability to finance the conflict and isolating it on the world stage, while supplying Ukraine with the weaponry it needed to stay in the fight.

Visiting one of the trench networks on Kyiv's frontlines in the opening days of the war, I found the men armed with British next generation light anti-tank weapons (NLAWs), which have had a decisive impact on the battlefield against

**“Survivors have testified to their barbaric treatment by Russia's death squads”**

Russian tanks. By the end of March, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Ukraine had been sent more than 10 anti-tank systems for every Russian tank on Ukrainian soil.

Ukraine's fleet of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones, popularised by a song written by Ukrainian soldier Taras Borovok, also devastated Russian convoys and artillery batteries. Ankara continued to supply TB2s to Ukraine even while trying to downplay its ongoing support of Kyiv to its Russian ally.

Russia's biggest failure in the Battle of Kyiv was logistical. Through a combination of drone warfare, clever ambushes and the strategic targeting of Russian supply lines, Russia's quick advance into the Kyiv suburbs soon ran

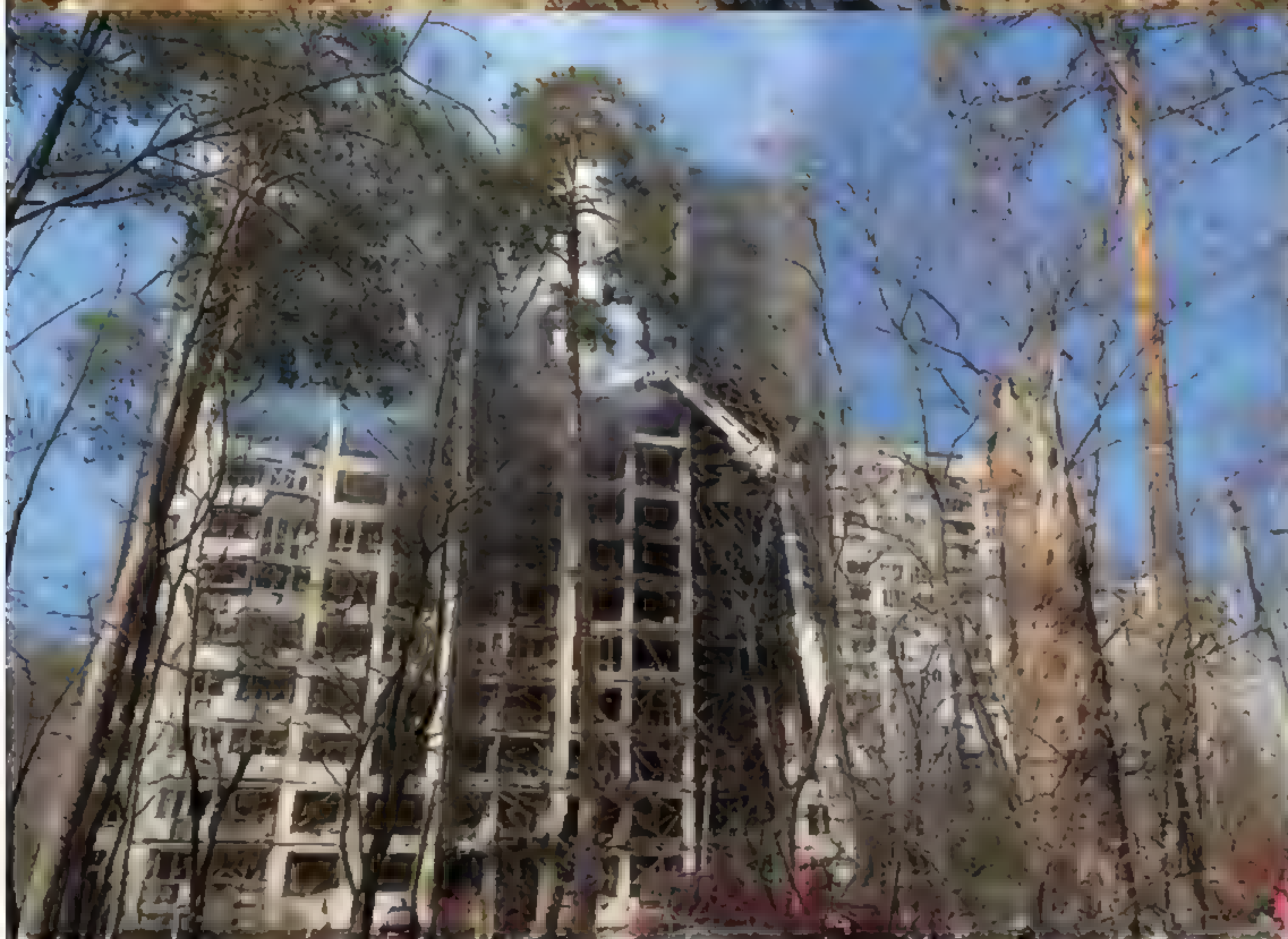


## INTO UNCERTAINTY

Refugees flee the Russian occupied town of Irpin in the Kyiv Oblast in early March

OZ KATERJI





#### DEATH AND DESTRUCTION

(Above) A mass grave behind a church in Bucha; (below) Firefighters work to put out a blaze in a Kyiv residential apartment building hit by a Russian missile

into a quagmire of Ukrainian counter attacks. The Russians had sought to besiege, bombard and starve Kyiv in the same way as they did in Mariupol in Ukraine's southeast. Instead, Ukraine cut Russia's Battalion Tactical Groups off from the fuel, food and ammunition required to continue their military assault, starving them of the supplies they needed to secure victory.

Within weeks, Russia's 40-mile convoy disappeared. Its troops had made no further gains in Kyiv after the opening days, and, after stabilising the frontlines, Ukraine started going on the offensive, eventually pushing beleaguered Russian troops out of the Kyiv Oblast and forcing Moscow into retreat. By the end of March, the Kremlin announced that it was ending its operations in Kyiv, a tacit admission

of defeat, and shifted its objectives to the east of the country. As Russian troops retreated from Kyiv, Ukrainian forces continued to assault the fleeing Russian soldiers, inflicting heavy casualties on the invading army. On 7 April, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov admitted Russia had suffered "significant losses of troops" as Russian forces were routed in the suburbs surrounding Kyiv, and the Ukrainians rejoiced at the liberation of their territories.

However, those celebrations would be short-lived as the atrocities Russian soldiers left in their wake were uncovered. At the time of writing, the bodies of Ukrainian civilians are still being exhumed from mass graves in Kyiv's suburbs. Survivors have testified to their barbaric treatment by Russia's fascist death squads raping and

murdering their way through the country while leaving the bodies of their victims to rot in the streets.

Standing above the mass grave in the affluent Bucha neighbourhood in the Kyiv Oblast, it is disturbingly evident that the horrors these people have suffered were intended to be replicated in the capital, as they have been across Ukraine in the territories that have fallen under Russian occupation. The devastation wrought upon the civilian infrastructure in the towns surrounding Kyiv is absolute, and the torment unleashed upon its people will be passed down for generations.

Russia did not only aim to capture Kyiv and topple its government, but it has tried to destroy Ukraine as a nation state and to humiliate and subjugate its people in an attempt to erase the very existence of a Ukrainian national identity. Its genocidal intent cannot be doubted by anyone who has witnessed the slaughter its troops carried out here under the flag of the Russian Federation. It is a miracle of human strength that, despite the overwhelming might of its foe, Ukraine held the line and defended its capital. It is a damning indictment of the human condition that the Russian people have allowed such monstrosities to be carried out in their name.

Russia may have lost the Battle for Kyiv this time, but Ukraine is still fighting for survival as Moscow regroups and attempts to fully capture the east of the country. There should be no reason to believe that the Kremlin has abandoned its desires to subjugate the rest of Ukraine, either. The world is still yet to learn the true scope of the ongoing horrors in the occupied territories while the international community sits on its hands and refuses to increase support for a country many presumed would be crushed within days.

Ukraine continues to fight, alone, against a revanchist dictatorship hellbent on its annihilation. The future of the free world and the post-war liberal world order rests almost entirely on its shoulders while the great European powers continue to indulge their blood-soaked addiction to Russian oil and gas.

By defeating Russia in Kyiv, Ukraine has already done the impossible. Today, it demands only that its allies do what is possible to help them win that fight and overcome their aggressor. It is imperative for the future of European liberal democracy that this call is answered. @



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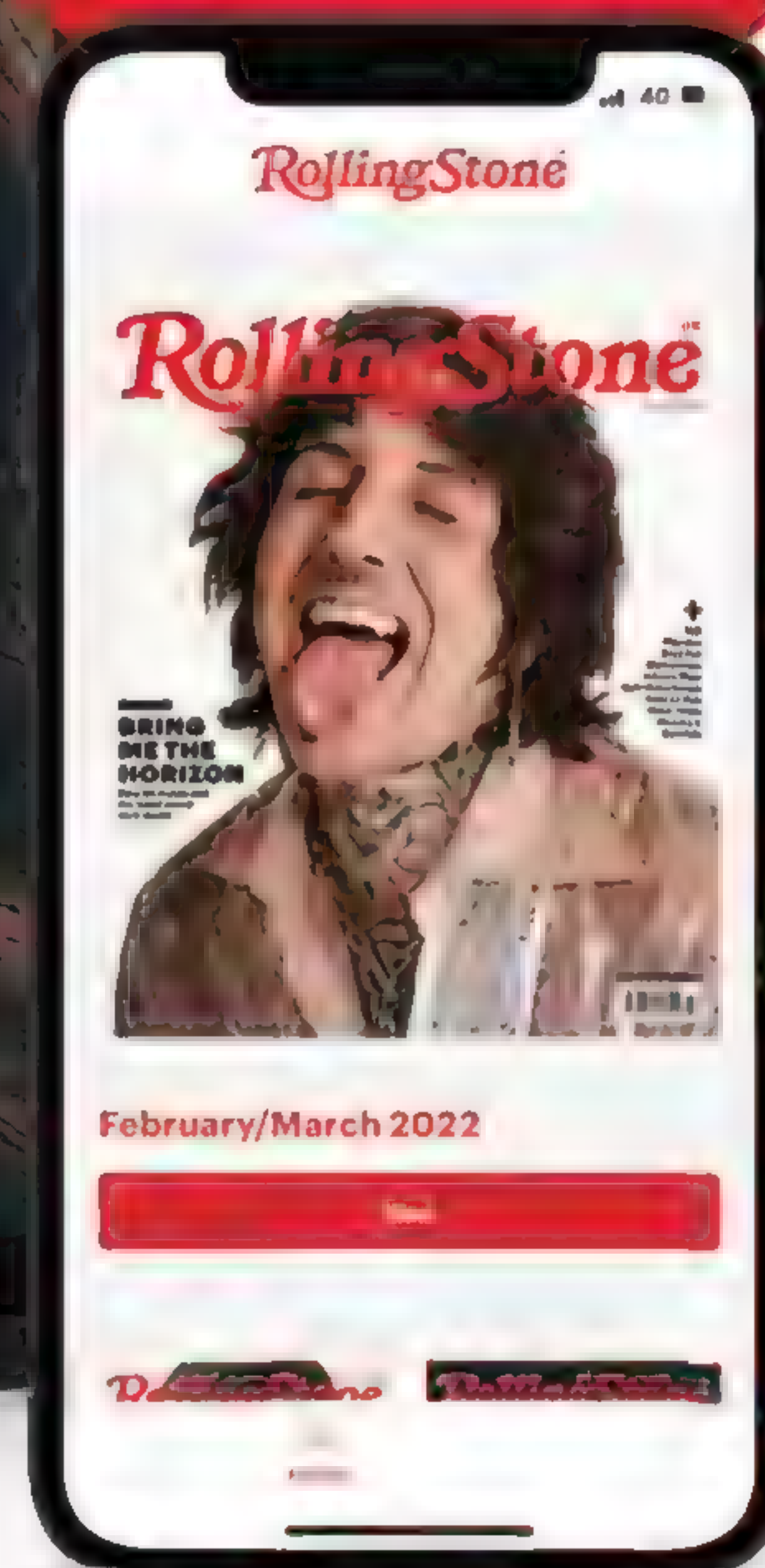


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# Beyond the fairy tale

The ethereal singer Florence Welch has hit her stride yet finds herself at a crossroads. With music that asks eternal questions like whether to have children or if a creative life is a selfish one, Florence + the Machine's fifth album is rich with personal meaning. Rolling Stone UK meets her to consider this levelling up in her private life and career

**By Tara Joshi**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUTH OSSAI  
FASHION DIRECTION BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN  
STYLING BY ALDENE JOHNSON













# It's hard not to think about the deceptive nature of mythology when it comes to Florence Welch.

THERE IS ETHEREAL international pop icon Florence + the Machine, the emphatic, larger-than-life music persona that has shaped much of Welch's life since her late teens, singing epic, quasi-spiritual songs that brim with yearning, euphoria, imagination, musings on the cosmos, or deep-seated sadness.

Then there's the 35-year-old woman sitting mid-morning in a pub in leafy Camberwell, south London, near where she lives, sipping

on an espresso and talking drolly about mundane things like cleaning and watching too much TV. This Florence is an anxious overthinker with mild agoraphobia, who forces herself to do a daily morning coffee run to a nearby café, dressed down in her pyjamas and a hoodie.

Admittedly, this Florence still exudes plenty of whimsy. The first time we meet on the set of her cover shoot, she is bounding

"I'm such a mix of being quite a logical, practical person and then also being completely away with the fairies. But on some level, I think you would think I'm more woo-woo than I am"

and drifting between rooms, long auburn hair cascading behind her as she sings *Be the Cowboy*-era Mitski songs to herself. She laughs in loud ripples that echo across the room.

Today, she is wearing a floaty, forest-green dress with panels of white lace. Her arms and hands are a sketchbook of tattoos, with fingers covered in intricate gold vintage rings and nails bearing chipped pale-pink polish. She speaks about poems, Zadie Smith essays and tarot cards, and sometimes to illustrate a point she will burst into song or emphatically yell. For all her dreamy nature, she has a quiet self-awareness that makes her seem of this Earth after all.

"I'm such a mix of actually being quite a logical, practical person and then also being completely away with the fairies," she laughs. "But on some level, I think you would think that I'm more woo-woo than I am."

Florence + the Machine's fifth album, *Dance Fever*, is about to arrive. It's her first since 2018's *High as Hope*, which – along with its 2015 predecessor *How Big, How Blue, How Beautiful* – saw her move into more literal lyrical territory, exploring more obviously personal subject matter. Her earlier work was woven with sparkling tales of looking glasses and the sea, but on *High as Hope*, which came after Florence's sobriety, she wrote in raw terms about stark realities such as her eating disorder (on 'Hunger' she offers the line: "At seventeen, I started to starve myself / I thought that love was a kind of emptiness").

When *Dance Fever* was first announced via her Instagram in March, she used the caption, "A fairy tale in 14 songs." With regal artwork and vast, glimmering tracks topped with formidable vocals that seem to narrate on monsters and kings, it's a descriptor that takes us back to the early days of Florence. But this is a collection that speaks to all manner of anxieties, from shared experiences such as ageing, womanhood, the fragility of the planet and the pandemic to more intimate musings on her career, relationships, loneliness; simply existing. And unlike most fairy tales, it's somewhat unclear whether there's a happy ending.

"How I make sense of the world is to turn it into myth and fable," she shares as the spring light pours in through the tall window next to us, framing her like a portrait. "Turning people and things into characters... I think that's how I process everything."

She is aware that this is something people do to her, too: her fans, the media, and even new romances. "I think a lot of people think, 'Florence + the Machine! She's just gonna be lounging around in silky stuff.' No, I'm gonna be a ball of anxiety, with the TV on, constantly just trying to keep out the bad thoughts," she starts to laugh, not entirely bitterly. "It's not gonna be fun and



glamorous, I promise – there’s the stage, and then there’s the very agoraphobic person who needs just to be in the house, you know, especially since I stopped drinking. I am very much a homebody. So, I think people come on board thinking it’s gonna be really fun and exciting, but it’s that sense of like, ‘Oh, the public will get the good bits.’ You won’t. You’ll get the tears.”

On *Dance Fever*, she turns this way of thinking inwards. Through its mystical and epic storytelling born from the vast kingdom of her imagination, the album seeks to confront the dichotomy between the desires and needs of Florence Welch, the human, versus Florence Welch, the creator and myth.

A MYSTERIOUS ‘DANCING PLAGUE’ occurred throughout medieval and early modern Europe, with sometimes thousands of people congregating and manically beginning to dance for no discernible reason. Some commentators suggested that it was a ‘mass madness’ brought about by people trying to relieve themselves through periods of stress, trauma and poverty. *Dance Fever* takes its name from this phenomenon, known as ‘choreomania’ (also the title of a skittering, frantic track on the record).

In some ways, it’s a concept that runs the gamut of Florence’s oeuvre: dance as an uncontrollable, restorative ritual to shake off the blues. “The summation of the record is probably that line ‘And when I’m dancing, I’m free,’” she says, “It’s relentless, and then I’ll dance and it will be like, ‘Oh my GOD, it went away!’ And it’s about wanting to give other people that feeling, too.”

There is something especially meaningful about the dance floor being a healing space. In February 2020, Florence was in New York City, recording with renowned producer, songwriter and artist in his own right, Jack Antonoff (she’d wanted to work with him off the back of her love of *Melodrama* and *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*). The initial sessions were going well, until her mum called and told her she should probably come home for a bit – Florence acquiesced, because, like most of the world, she figured that the Covid-19 pandemic could surely only last a month or so. It would be like “a snow day” from work, she and Antonoff agreed.

The reality, of course, was very different. Being forced to pause for so long had not been on Florence’s agenda after more than a decade of constant movement. “I need the movement to move it out of myself,” she confesses. “If I sit in the sadness, it doesn’t go away.” And so, lockdown was understandably not ideal.

For Florence, songwriting had always been about turning the individual experience into

a shared one. “But at that point, it was such a collective experience... How could you make that individual? What would I even have to say about this?” Her creative process had been about tapping into her subconscious, but at that point it was absent: “It was just full alert all the time, there was nothing to tap into. And so as soon as I pressed a note on the piano, I just burst into tears. I didn’t have words, I only had grief.”

Six months later, she managed to write ‘Heaven Is Here’, a stomping spell of a song which she describes as “a purge” after such a long period of not being able to get anything out. Florence had wanted a break from touring, but being faced with the very real possibility that maybe live music wouldn’t come back was overwhelming: “I can be overdramatic at the best of times, but imagining a world without live music? I really don’t know if I could live in that world.”

At times, Florence can be quite fatalistic – as explored on album track ‘Cassandra’, she says that part of her felt like the pandemic was her being punished for any prescience in her work, and for wanting to rest for a while. (She then laughs at the innate ego of this: “‘Why is this happening to me?!’ Like, no, it’s happening to everyone.”)

When she met up with Dave Bayley from Glass Animals soon after writing ‘Heaven Is Here’, it was with the intent of making dance music – songs that specifically had the live experience in mind. Finally, the record she had feared was lost

began to make sense again – but now there was a core of grief and fragility that underpinned pre-existing themes of introspection and her relationship with creativity.

The result is that *Dance Fever* is full of songs that offer cathartic release: some are hefty dance-floor-ready tracks, others have a more restrained, gospel warmth. It’s an album that finds Florence pondering her agency in the hellish fairy tale of her own life: whether she should be taking medication for her mental health, catastrophising, questioning her happiness, relationships, mortality. Her songs are “like children begging to be born”.

It’s a record that asks how long it will be before the crowd turns on their dream girl: could people truly love her with all of her very human flaws?

STARDOM CAME QUICKLY to a chaotic young Florence. Though she had various musical endeavours in the 00s, it was her work with her friend, keyboardist Isabella Summers, that began to garner attention. Initially performing as Florence Robot and Isa Machine, the pair had started making music together in 2006, playing shows and uploading demos, and quickly attracting the hype of music blogs and MySpace users alike. By 2008, Florence + the Machine was signed to Island Records, and in 2009 they won what was then something of a music industry kingmaker, the Brits Critics’ Choice Award.

“It was just full alert all the time, there was nothing to tap into. And so as soon as I pressed a note on the piano, I just burst into tears. I didn’t have words, I only had grief”















"How I make sense of the world  
is to turn it into myth and fable.  
Turning people and things into  
characters... I think that's how I  
process everything"









“Sometimes fame does feel like loss, like a little bit of your humanity got lost along the way. All I ever wanted was to be a singer, but you’re so naive as to the costs that will come with it. How do you retain your humanness?”

Florence had been anxious since childhood, but her self-doubt and fear was exacerbated by that late-00s era when her face was suddenly everywhere, and she was being scrutinised for how she looked. She started to measure her worth by her weighing scale, caking herself in make-up and fancy clothes, hoping she would fit into this bewitching new world of red carpets. That period still hangs over her creative decisions. “When I first put music out, my life completely upturned,” she says. “And so now, every time I put something out, I think I still have in my head: ‘is my life going to be completely flipped?’”

Florence talks about fame as an almost separate, uncontrollable entity that happened to her: “Sometimes fame does feel like loss, like a little bit of your humanity got lost along the way. All I ever wanted was to be a singer, but you’re so naive as to the costs that will come with it. How do you retain your humanness?”

Camberwell is a location that has kept her at least somewhat grounded through it all. We are around the corner from the hospital where Florence was born; near the house she grew up in; down the road from her current home; not far from where her sister lives. “I think there is something about the consistency of it, when your life has changed so much,” she tells me. “I’m a creature of habit.”

The daughter of Nick and Evelyn Welch (the former an advertising executive and the latter a professor of Renaissance studies), Florence was one of three siblings. Her parents were

relatively lax, and her relationship with them and general upbringing is something she drily wonders about. “My therapist always keeps trying to pull me back to talk about my childhood, and I’m like,” she starts laughing and yells, “‘It can’t be that simple! I’m complex! I’m different! It’s not about my mum! I’m gonna be the one person who it’s not about their mother!’”

As a pre-teen Florence fell in love with skate punk boys, deciding to emulate her crushes and become a skate punk, too. “That was back when music wasn’t just music, it was what you wear, it’s who you fancy, it’s your friends,” she starts cackling. “You dress in the baggy jeans and then discover skater boys don’t actually fancy skaters, they fancy girls who dress really hot. As though he would see how long my wallet chain was and fall in love!” She even briefly formed a rock band called Toxic Cockroaches, though admits that they got no further than deciding on the band name. “It was music that had a whole identity to it, and a scene,” she says, conceding that it was weird that she was going to NOFX gigs at 13.

She mentions repeatedly that she didn’t feel beautiful as a teenager. I recount a line from her 2018 book of lyrics, poetry and diary-style entries, *Useless Magic*: “I could fall in love with a plastic bag if it paid me some attention.” She starts guffawing, “I know!” She sighs, “It’s really funny, you can have everyone applauding you, but a handsome

FLORENCE

stranger giving you compliments... There’s a core of abandonment there that if someone is making me feel seen or pouring love into me, I’m just like ‘I’ve just met you but I’m wildly in love with you!’”

Surely, though, given her profession, she is hardly lacking attention and compliments? “People think that, but it’s more in your daily life that people want to keep you grounded,” she says. “So your regular friends and family are more like, ‘We still want you to know that you’re a really frustrating individual!’” She continues, “I think that there’s a core of me that’s still really susceptible to charm, because there’s the little girl who never thought anyone fancied her. I didn’t have a boyfriend the whole time at school. And I was just so desperate to be seen and be loved.”

Perhaps her teen years lacked romance, but they still hold significantly more colourful stories than most. A 15-year-old Florence would attend student parties at Camberwell College of Arts, meeting the people who would give her what she describes as “a musical education” (aka introducing her to Joy Division). She also drunkenly barged her way into infamous DIY dance-punk band Test Icicles’ dressing room in 2005, her first meeting with another music ingenue, Dev Hynes. It was only a little later that they would actually become friends, writing together and even occasionally performing in each other’s groups.

“Dev took me on my first tour as a backing singer for Lightspeed Champion, and I was just jumping around and singing way too loud,” she recalls with booming laughter. In 2007, the pair recorded a cover of the entirety of Green Day’s album *Nimrod* in Hynes’ kitchen under the name ‘Team Perfect’ – and yes, you can still find the recordings on YouTube.

I suggest this is all somewhat at odds with how people might perceive Florence now, as an effeminate, pretty, art-pop auteur. She starts shout-singing Limp Bizkit’s ‘Break Stuff’ – “*Everything is fucked / everybody sucks!*” – and laughs. “If you look at earlier pop-punk, it’s simple chords, energy, pace, relentlessness, and I do think it has influenced me. It’s simplicity, but also engendering feeling... Even after I found my more romantic aesthetic, I think I learned a lot about crowd control from those punk gigs in Camberwell, and how aggressive you had to be to do that.”

Florence has always been known for a wild abandon in her live shows – running through the crowd like she’d never stop, climbing up on the rigging. “I think it’s where I can exorcise a lot of frustrations and feelings, and be big and scary,” she says. “My performance style is probably a lot more based on the masculine than the feminine and moving between those two. So, when people ask things like, ‘What’s

JUNE JULY 2022



it like being a female headliner?', I'm kind of like... 'I don't really know?' It always felt far more fluid to me than that."

**I**N 2017, CLAIRE DEDERER wrote a piece for the *Paris Review*: 'What do we do with the art of monstrous men?' In the midst of #MeToo ripping through Hollywood, she picked apart the work of known abusers but also asked a question of herself, positing that to be a successful artist, "When it comes to necessary ingredients, [you need] selfishness. A book is made out of small selfishnesses. The selfishness of shutting the door against your family. The selfishness of ignoring the pram in the hall [...] I have to wonder: maybe I'm not monstrous enough."

I put it to Florence that this is an overarching theme of *Dance Fever* – creativity as a selfish monster that is much harder to commit to with the timelines and expectations of nurture placed on womanhood. On the searing 'King' – the album's first single – she refrains, unfaltering: "*I am no mother, I am no bride, I am king.*"

She agrees with the assessment: "The biggest relationship in my life has always been the song itself. A lot of this record is about unpacking that relationship with the creative entity and being like, 'Are you actually a force for fucking good? Or are you actually demonic?'" Florence used to think her songs were 'angels' but questioned it when – after intending to finally settle down for a while following the fourth record – she felt the songs calling to her again. "'No, you're coming with us!'" she yelps. "As you get older, what you are giving up for that becomes more and more. It feels more like a force that's dragging you away from something... but you kind of enjoy it? And so, it feels much more Faustian than it ever did before."

The decision to do another album and book another tour felt like an admission to herself that, once again, she wasn't going to start a family any time soon. "It felt so hard – like, 'Am I cold? What kind of creature am I?' There was a point where I could have decided not to, and I still decided to book it. And maybe it's the way we've all been programmed, but I do wonder: 'When is my sudden need to bring life into the world, and will that overtake me until I need to do it?' I would really like a family at some point, but the creative thing is so strong."

We talk about hitting your 30s, and the jarring realisation that your peers having children is no longer an alien or undesired thing (and she mentions a *Reductress* meme about a 29-year-old 'teen mom'). "The way that it feels to me now, which maybe is creeping through on this album, is that it feels like a slow, creeping overtake. It feels like a little ghost – I feel haunted by the idea of children, rather than feeling like 'I'm ready!'"

FLORENCE

2022 JULY 20

"Actual intimacy, commitment? I really struggle with it. You can spend your whole life craving love, and when someone gives you real, wholesome love, you're like, 'Why would you do that? I'm disgusting!'"

she pauses. "But then, it's this dread, that maybe you're not ready now, but what if you then get to the place where you're sure and you've missed it? Time isn't on your side, and that kind of rage is what the scream at the end of 'King' is – I'm not saying I don't want these things; I just want more time! But... time isn't like that. You can't escape it."

**I**N 2018, ON the final track on *High as Hope*, 'No Choir', Florence suggests that contentment makes for mundane subject matter ("*And it's hard to write about being happy, 'cos the older I get, I find that happiness is an extremely uneventful subject / And there would be no grand choirs to sing / No chorus could come in / About two people sitting doing nothing*").

Four years later, I wonder if she frames happiness differently: whether she can accept love and happiness without doubting it, without assuming it will negatively impact on her ability to create art. She takes a moment to respond, twisting her long red hair up into a bun. "I think part of it is long-term recovery from eating disorders," she begins. "So much of that is rejecting nourishment – 'I don't deserve to eat, I don't deserve to feel comfortable.' Anorexic thinking is still part of my life, even though the anorexia itself isn't. And so, with emotional intimacy, which is kind of like being fed, sometimes you can be like, 'No, that's too much, I don't need it.'"

One of the demos which didn't make it onto the album has the lyric: "*Learning how*

*to let yourself be happy is the hardest part / Learning how to let yourself be loved? / Jesus, where to start?*". In part, Florence thinks she hacked her brain by giving this intimacy to her listeners instead. "Being intimate on such a grand scale is such a safe way to do it," she says, "But actual intimacy, actual commitment? I really struggle with it. You can spend your whole life craving love, and when someone gives you real wholesome love, loving the real you, you're like, 'Why would you do that? I'm disgusting!'"

Of course, it's even more complicated when your life's work has been creating this big monument to yearning. Florence Welch is deeply self-aware as she smiles. "I'm trying to get over myself as this tragic figure who can't do love," she says, wryly. "I'm like, 'No, that's part of my mythology, maybe I need that pain for my songs! My songs are the things that have really been there for me! But how committed am I to my own loneliness?'"

There's a line on *Dance Fever* where Florence sings, "*I thought that I was here with you, but it was always just an empty room.*" The 'you' in question is that creative entity that has shaped Welch's life; the angels and demons pulling her along to make another song. "You know, I think I'm finally alone with my creativity in my space that I've made in exactly the way I want to see the world," she sighs. "But really, I'm just sitting in a house alone." ®

**DANCE FEVER IS OUT 13 MAY. FLORENCE + THE MACHINE TOURS THE UK IN NOVEMBER 2022.**

FLORENCE WEARS DRESS BY GUCCI, NECKLACE BY REBECCA SWEETING, HAIR BY LEIGH KEATES AT THE WALL GROUP USING LIVING PROOF AND BABYLISS PRO TOOLS; MAKEUP BY SARAH REYGATE USING GUCCI BEAUTY; DIGI-TECH AND POST-PRODUCTION: RYAN COLEMAN; PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: LUKE KENE; LIGHTING TECH: CELIA CROFT; STYLING ASSISTANT: KAMELIA MCKAYED; PRODUCTION ASSISTANT: SACHA DANCE







**BRING IT ON**  
Yannis  
Philippakis  
rehearsing  
— something  
he actually  
hates doing





# RISE AND FOALS

Niall Doherty joins Foals in the rehearsal studio as the band gear up for a hectic summer touring their pulse-pounding new album *Life Is Yours*

**T**UCKED AWAY UNDER the railway arches on a residential street in Putney, south-west London, a beast is stirring. On a bitterly cold day in late March, Foals frontman Yannis Philippakis is standing at the door to the band's rehearsal room, beckoning me in. "Have you got earplugs?" he asks in a concerned manner, as he leads the way through a small lounge and into a large practice space.

At one end of the room, Foals are set up as they would be onstage, surrounded by masses of instruments, effects pedals and amps, a mixing

desk and a criss-crossing labyrinth of wires and flight cases opposite them. There's no time for small talk as Philippakis says: "Let's get on with it so we can all go to the pub."

After I utter a quick hello to guitarist and keyboardist Jimmy Smith, drummer Jack Bevan and touring musicians Jack Freeman and Kit Monteith – wham! – Foals dive into the jubilant title track of their excellent new album *Life Is Yours*. Don't worry, my earplugs are in.

Immediately, everything that has made Foals one of the UK's most important guitar bands is present and correct: the wiry, melodic guitar

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **KIT MONTEITH**



**ON THE ROAD**  
Preparing for  
their biggest  
UK tour yet







lines, propulsive beats and a rhythmic swagger, those yearning hooks, and that moment that all great Foals songs have where everything seems to lock into one exhilarating gear. In between the airy synths and funk-laden grooves, there are also some new tricks that add an extra dimension. This characteristic flows through their new record. Foals have always been the danciest of rock groups but *Life Is Yours* dramatically ramps up the Balearic euphoria.

Then, all of sudden, it's over. What to do when you're the only person in the room who's not in the band and they've just played an absolute banger? You clap. It's polite. Philippakis smiles. "You like that?"

"I thought it sounded a bit furry," says Bevan.

"It did a bit, it's this room," responds Smith.

"If we took our headphones off, it wouldn't sound furry," states Philippakis, "it would sound like waking a dinosaur up."

Watching Foals rehearse is to be introduced to the band's live shorthand. Songs can be "furry", "sleazy" or "spicy", or, as in the case of some of the backing vocals they were working out earlier in the day, they can be "heinous".

"It was like an orchestra of bemused cats," says Philippakis, shaking his head. "Foxes' mating season."

The group are here as they prepare for their biggest UK tour yet. Barring any hiccups, by the time you read this they will have played huge venues up and down the land, taking in dates at Birmingham Arena and four shows at London's mammoth Olympia plus a bonus ball thrown in at Brixton Academy. At least now when they play the famous south London venue, they have an arsenal of songs to draw on. Fuelled by Bevan's early tendency to play everything at twice the speed, the first time they headlined there in 2008 the show was over in 38 minutes.

"It's the shortest headline show at Brixton ever," says Smith.

"I remember reading a review that was like, 'Good show but these guys either need to play way slower or write a lot more songs,'" laughs Philippakis.

These days, Bevan plays to a metronome, curbing his inclination to up the BPMs.

A lack of material is also no longer a concern. There have been a further six Foals albums since

**"We've played  
'Mountain At My  
Gates' so many  
times that there is no  
need to rehearse it"  
— Philippakis**





their 2008 debut *Antidotes* paired math-rock experimentalism with upbeat indie anthems. And having won a 2020 Brit Award off the back of their ambitious 2019 two-partner *Everything Not Saved Will Be Lost*, Foals are bigger than ever. Oh, wait, they're about to play another song: earplugs back in!

Next, they run through 'Wake Me Up'. A striding disco-pop number, it's sure to be a centerpiece when they headline festival stages this summer. They follow it up with the intricate electro-pop jubilation of recent single '2am'.

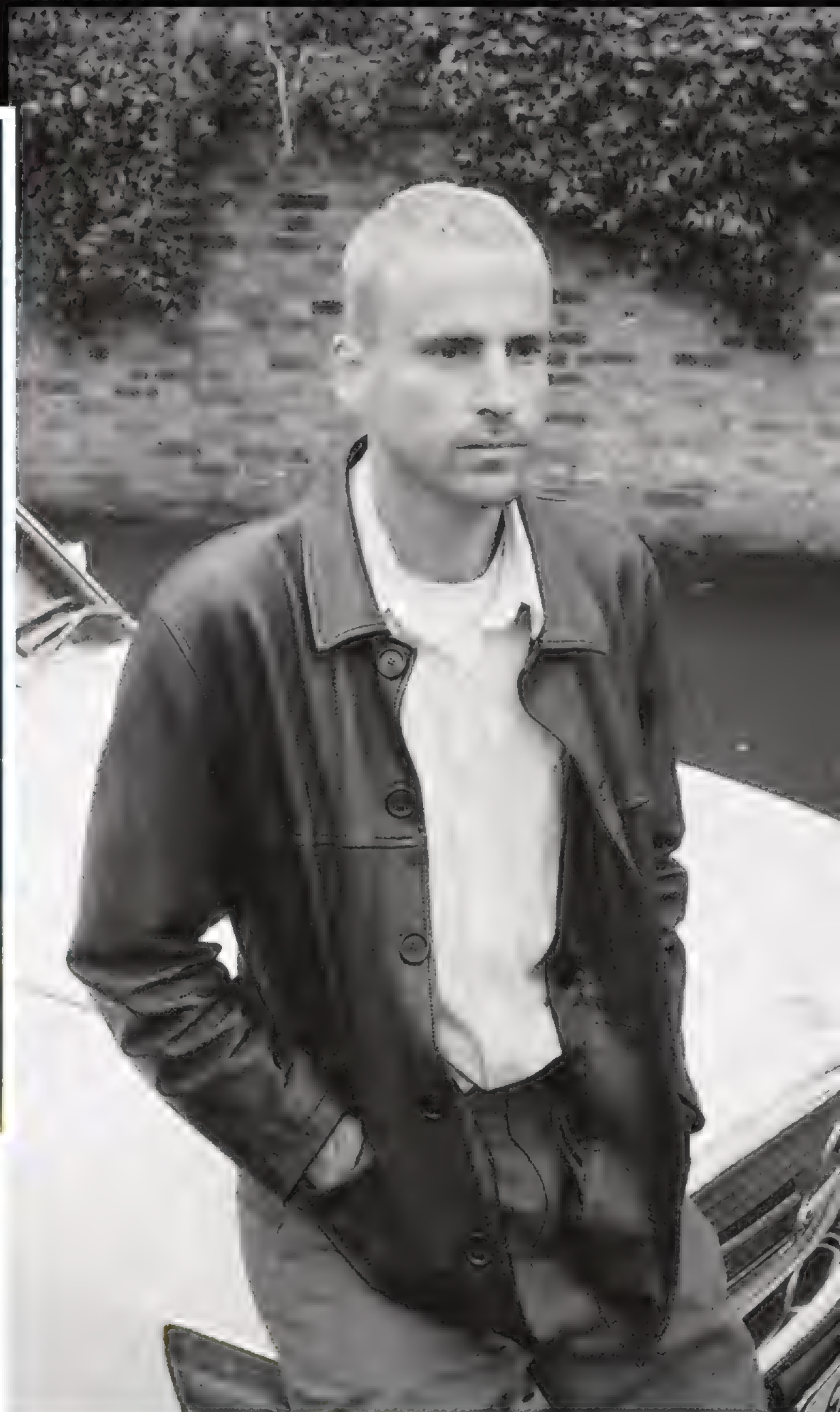
"Yeah, we still need to figure out how to finish that," says Philippakis, taking his guitar off afterwards. He hates rehearsing, he admits, and you can see his point – no Foals live performance should ever be for an audience of one. "We've played 'Mountain At My Gates' so many times that there is really no need to rehearse it," he says, "but you know that the one

**REGROUPING** The departure of two members has seen Foals become a tight-knit trio of Jimmy Smith, Jack Bevan and Yannis Philippakis, with a sound that's more expansive than ever

moment we don't rehearse it is when we'll mess it up. Anyway, pub?"

We decamp to the Prince of Wales, a boozer around the corner, and take a table outside. Smith, just back from LA where he lives with his girlfriend, has not yet become reaccustomed to the unwelcoming British climate.

"This is the coldest I've been for about seven months," he tells me as he sips a pint of Estrella. Rehearsals tend to be plain sailing, he explains.



It's not until the band are actually on the road that things can get a teeny bit hostile. "The fight happens on the first show when everyone gets nervous," shares the guitarist.

"Or everyone drinks too much," adds Philippakis.

This will be the first Foals tour with the core line-up now reduced to a trio after the departure of keyboardist Edwin Congreave, who left to pursue academic studies last year. He was the





second member to abandon ship after bassist Walter Gervers exited in 2018. Despite being two men down, though, the band's sound palette is more expansive than ever on *Life Is Yours*, its team of producers including Fontaines D.C. collaborator Dan Carey, Florence + The Machine producer John Hill, Miles James and A.K. Paul bringing a variety of different shades to the record's sonic spectrum.

"It was a valuable experience to work with multiple different producers, to expand the family that's involved for the record," reflects Philippakis. "Now that it's three of us writing, having extra opinions was interesting. It could have gone wrong, but it enriched the whole experience."

Curiously, Foals have never made an album with the same producer twice and Philippakis wonders how different their artistic evolution

**"It was a valuable experience to work with multiple different producers, to expand the family that's involved for the record"**  
**— Philippakis**

might have been had they found a long-term creative foil.

"The good thing about the way we've done it is that you're having this massive new energy plug into you and there's a different chemistry each time you do a record," he says. "But also, you're having to avoid certain pitfalls again and again and getting to know each other, like, 'Oh, this is the point of the record where you realise

I'm an asshole – great!"

Touring is where Foals really come to life – not for nothing was a 2020 documentary about the band titled *Rip Up the Road* – but as three men now in their mid-30s, they are aware of the need to rein it in. Bevan looks back on an extensive stint on the road to support their 2015 *What Went Down* album with horror. "That nearly broke me, and it would have if the tour had been two



months longer. We'd been drinking too much, we all grew these hideous beards."

"We were chubby and had all gone a bit yellow," nods Smith.

"There's only so much beer you can drink," concurs Philippakis, finishing his pint.

"I'm finding as I get older that I have to maintain my fitness to some degree," confides Bevan, who about a minute earlier was pondering going over the road to Pizza Express for his dinner.

"Yeah, you treat yourself like a real temple now," remarks Philippakis, drily. Our glasses are empty, but the evening is still young. Philippakis is ordering an Uber and heading back towards Camberwell, where he lives. He suggests I join him for some more chat in the car: "Maybe there will be another pub waiting for us at the end?" I hop in.

**Y**ANNIS PHILIPPAKIS IS good company. The 36-year-old can be warm, smart, combative, funny and spiky, sometimes all in the same sentence. Understanding Philippakis is the key to understanding Foals. The band's music is made in his image: it can be cocksure at the same time as sounding vulnerable, both insular and communal, melancholic and elated. And yes, it is also furry. Philippakis has a habit during interviews of repeating your question back to you in a tone that says, "Are you sure you want to ask me that?" But here we are, in the back of a taxi as it snakes across south London. What do you want to talk about, Yannis?

He mulls it over. The first thing he'd like to discuss is the title of the new record. He thinks it's worth clarifying that as a big sloganeering statement that can be taken on face value, the title *Life Is Yours* has maybe obscured some of the intended nuance.

"It's not just meant to be a confetti cannon moment," he says. "It's meant to be like an antidote to depression. In a way, it's quite solemn advice to oneself and to other people, where if mortality is on people's minds, whether to deal with the pandemic, also getting old and parents getting older and all the rest of it. Obviously, this is an uplifting record that's made for communal moments, but it's not like Foals have forgotten all

**"One thing I'm struggling with in music is the ephemerality of everything"**

**— Philippakis**







**RELAXING** The band has learned to kick back





of their light and shade and they're just putting on their party hats."

He thinks that it's important for him, Smith and Bevan to remember and acknowledge what a special thing they've built up. He is proud of how Foals have reinvented themselves over the course of their career and continually sought out new ground, even if at times that's meant challenging their audience.

"At least we genuinely have been striving," he says, staring out of the window as the city rolls

past. At the same time, though, he confesses to a weariness at the direction that culture has taken and at the way technology has affected how artists go about their business.

"The sheer amount of output that is required from an act these days, it's impossible to keep the quality up there in the way that we used to. We used to be able to agonise over one music video, three great photos and two interviews but now, essentially, you've been turned into your own marketing team."

The band have long had a saying between them: Foals Forever. But in the light of the two departures from the group, Philippakis has found himself asking, "Can it be forever?"

"I'm going to make music whatever happens," he says, "but the question is, at what point is Foals not Foals any more? You see lots of bands still doing it just because the name rings out, but I think beyond a certain point that would be difficult to do in Foals."

We've reached our destination and as luck would have it, there's a pub just around the corner. As I order a Heineken for me and a pint of Butty Bach ale for him, Philippakis runs through all the other musical projects he's got on the go. There's a collaboration with the late pioneering drummer Tony Allen he'd like to complete, an unfinished collaborative album with Underworld's Karl Hyde that's in stasis, and he also has a long-harboured ambition to make an album of traditional Greek folk music.

A career like Damon Albarn's, pinballing from





one thing to the next, appeals to him. He once asked Albarn how he managed it all. “Get a PA,” the Blur singer and Gorillaz leader told him. “You need somebody to help you with the organisation to keep you ticking.”

Another elder statesman who has given him good advice is Radiohead’s Ed O’Brien. It was O’Brien who helped him finally quit smoking – he was working his way through two to three packs a day – by recommending he try cinnamon toothpicks. It’s worked so far.

“I am drinking more, though,” he says. Our pints drained, we get two more in, this time with chasers, Maker’s Mark for Philippakis and vodka for me. “That was my drink during *Antidotes*,” he recalls, looking at my glass. “Double vodka with ice and fresh lime. That’s why I’m so skinny in all the photos!”

Recently, he listened to *Antidotes* again and was surprised at how British his vocals sounded. “Some of that has been toned down a bit and that makes me a bit sad,” he says. He


**FOALS FOREVER** Foals are proud of the way they have reinvented themselves over their career, always striving to find something new – and still enjoying the ride

remembers being a little more socially brittle back in those days. “I wouldn’t be able to be diplomatic, I was so busy being me that I had no space to accommodate you.”

As we nurse one last drink, one final question: what would you retrain as if you couldn’t be a musician any more?

“A gardener,” he replies, without missing a beat. “One thing I’m struggling with in music is the ephemerality of everything. It genuinely bothers me. I can see why someone would want to become a gardener or a sculptor, where you make something and it’s fucking there, and it

can have a presence for a long time. I always thought music had that, where if you wrote a great song or a great album, it would live on, but now there’s so much output, so much flotsam. With some tending, a garden can last a lifetime.”

Finishing our drinks, we head out into the cold air and say our farewells, Philippakis tottering off down the road. There he goes, pondering what’s coming next, still pining to make his mark, desperate not to let life pass him by. With some tending, these things can last a lifetime. He knows that. Yannis Philippakis is Foals Forever. 





# TWIN PEAKS

Nova Twins Amy Love and Georgia South discuss the influences that have inspired their music, from the 90s to Britney Spears

BY DANNII LEIVERS

**H**EAVY MUSIC IS often at its most thrilling when you remove the rules and genre boundaries at will, which is something the Nova Twins know only too well. With their electric 2020 debut album, *Who Are the Girls?*, vocalist and guitarist Amy Love and bassist Georgia South dropped their exhilarating fusion of hip hop, punk and monstrous metal on an unsuspecting scene, their empowering lyrics smashing expectations long solidified by rock's old guard.

Mostly written during the pandemic, follow-up *Supernova* takes the band in a darker sonic direction. "We wanted to make something sound powerful," says Love, who calls the record a "true reflection" of the turmoil and isolation of

the past two years. "To help someone, if you needed a lift, you need an oomph, you need something to keep you focused and keep you going forward... for us this was that album."

Here, they talk Rolling Stone UK through some of the record's key influences.

## The 90s

**GEORGIA SOUTH:** The 90s just holds up. Even now in the club, people love the 90s. It's a magical era. Our video for 'K.M.B' was a homage to films such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Mean Girls* and *Clueless*. We wanted a sassy number, kind of like a Destiny's Child feel, but a Nova version. A very

dark Nova version.

**AMY LOVE:** That song was colourful, but it had this dark edge to it – it's called 'K.M.B', which stands for Kill My Boyfriend. It's obviously tongue-in-cheek because we don't want to kill our boyfriends... most of the time. When you look at the colour and grading of a film like *Pulp Fiction* and *Clueless*, those things shape the mood of a movie and it's the same for a song. That's what a lot of it's about, playing on the light and shade.

## Lockdown

**AMY:** Throughout that whole period, writing was our diary entry and therapy, and a way for us to



## DOUBLE VISION

Nova Twins  
headlining at  
Heaven earlier  
this year



**GEORGIA:** In school, the education system just doesn't teach you anything in front of slavery. But before that, the Black community had royals, the richest person that's ever been was Black. That always gets erased at school. They always give the victory to the white man, but actually it's completely different to what they perceive Black people's roots to be.

## Britney Spears' 'Work Bitch'

**AMY:** [The track] 'Choose Your Fighter' was fun. We were together and it was the last song we wrote on the album. We didn't have very long to write it... 24 hours. We're such slow writers, we'll happily take two weeks on a song. But we knew what kind of song we wanted...

**GEORGIA:** Heavy and energetic.

**AMY:** But we were knackered, so we had a 10-minute break, and we'd sit in the dining room and if one of us was flagging, we'd get Britney Spears' 'Work Bitch' on our phone and literally hold it up to one of our ears. We'd play that song over and over again until we got ourselves out of our seat. Britney got us through.

## Scrapbooks, colour and fashion

**AMY:** We get our inspiration from magazines or scrolling on Instagram or getting loads of materials and then putting them on top of each other and being, 'Oh, that's cool.' Almost having a scrapbook in our minds. Georgia knocked up a wicked mood board for the 'K.M.B' video. It was crazier than what we discussed; we had to take out some crazy bits, like dicks in blenders.

**GEORGIA:** For every song that has a video, we make our outfits, and we know the 'colour' of the song. We'd go to the most amazing, most special fabric shop. It's been there 30 years and now it's closed down – it's tragic. Every outfit we ever made came out of this fabric shop – we don't know what we're going to do now! 🤯

keep moving forward in life. We found so much light in what we perceived to be chaos. Me and Georgia lived together for a long time, so it was the first time we'd lived apart for 10 years. Even though we were separated, the music would always pull us together and weirdly it was so in sync, anything we sent back and forth to each other. [But] in the chaos, there was always lots of hope.

We love that [the album] shows all sides, it's a true reflection of being human. 'Antagonist' was us coming [back] together for the first time. Towards the end of the song, the jam-out section was just me and Georgia having fun being back together and we said, "That end piece is staying because that is the energy we were feeling right there." That was our comeback triumph, everything we've

gone through and everything that's happened, like, this is: "We're here. We're back."

## The Black Lives Matter movement

**AMY:** We wrote 'Cleopatra' right off the back of a few protests we went to for BLM. We felt really in touch with our heritage, and we wanted to celebrate it. There was so much around that time – tragic imagery that was being passed around carelessly and it was tough to take and to see. When we went to these marches there was a feeling of unity and people coming together.







# Tuning Into the Static

*With one of the most intriguing rock debuts in years, **Static Dress** refuse to put their region on the map, preferring instead to exist in their own world of meticulous, mysterious curation. Frontman Olli Appleyard talks about their debut album Rouge Carpet Disaster, the need to reform alternative rock, and the delicate balance between ambition and creative insanity*

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BY **JENESSA WILLIAMS**  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **OLLI APPELYARD**

**NEW LINE-UP**  
(Clockwise  
from left) Sam  
Ogden, Olli  
Appleyard,  
Connor Reilly  
and Contrast



**I**S IT JUST ME, or is this room sick?" Standing next to art and sculpture, Olli Appleyard is taken by his first visit to The Hepworth Wakefield, revelling in the brutalist architecture. He chats quickly as we wander around an exhibition on surrealism, musing about pieces that inspire – an emo-tastic display of surgical instruments and pieces that look uncannily like the ones Kim Kardashian shared of her daughter North West's pandemic art.

He gravitates to 'Parasol', a giant painting by Berlin artist Stefanie Heinze, fixating on a section in the right-hand corner where cobalt blue meets garish orange. "I'm sorry if I go quiet," he apologises. "It's just that

I'll literally look at something like this and I'm... gone".

Having just returned from a three-week stint supporting Funeral for a Friend, he's openly exhausted, having stayed up until 5am this morning editing tour photos. But here he is, cracked iPhone in hand, taking photos that will inevitably inspire a creative idea. It might be a merch drop, a soundscape, a tiny clue to be written into something in four albums' time. He's not sure what yet, but these colours speak to him, and so they must be noted down.

It's this relentless mentality that makes Static Dress one of the most promising new acts in the country, and Appleyard a serious frontperson to watch. Committed to the kind of concept and ambition that most wouldn't consider tackling until they're several records deep, the four-piece have been a band since 2018. In that short time they have strived to create a form of emo-hardcore that

transcends categorisation. It's a plan that appears to be working. With a steady stream of singles (plus soundtrack and *Prologue* comic book), they have racked up support slots with alt-rock contemporaries Holding Absence, Wargasm and Creeper, and gained a legion of their own devotees, who are drawn to their dexterity and intrigue. Now, there's a debut album on the way, nailing feverish screamo and sensitive ballads with equal panache. Take these plaudits to their leader, and he'll say that it's all a matter of defiant perseverance.

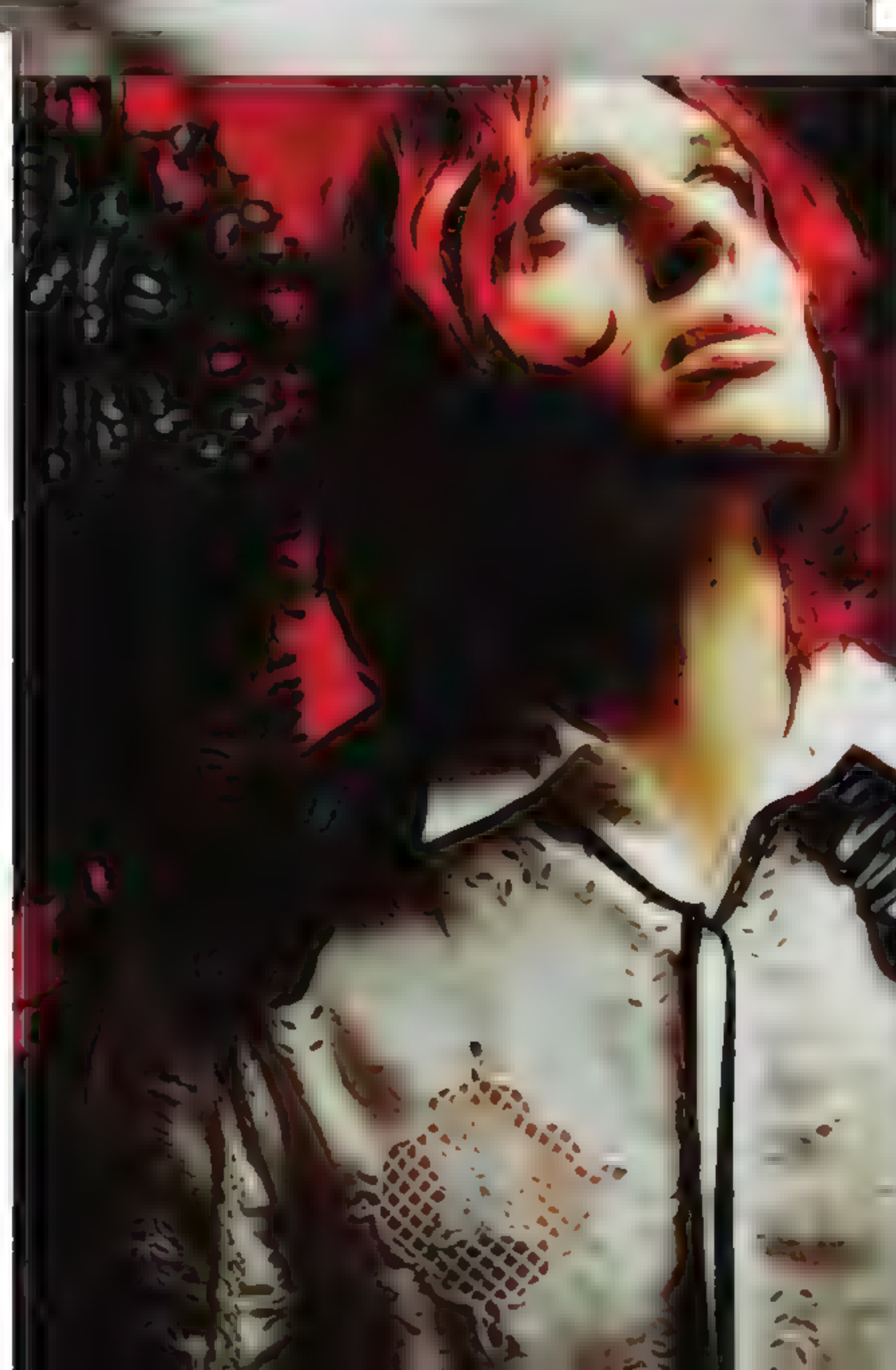
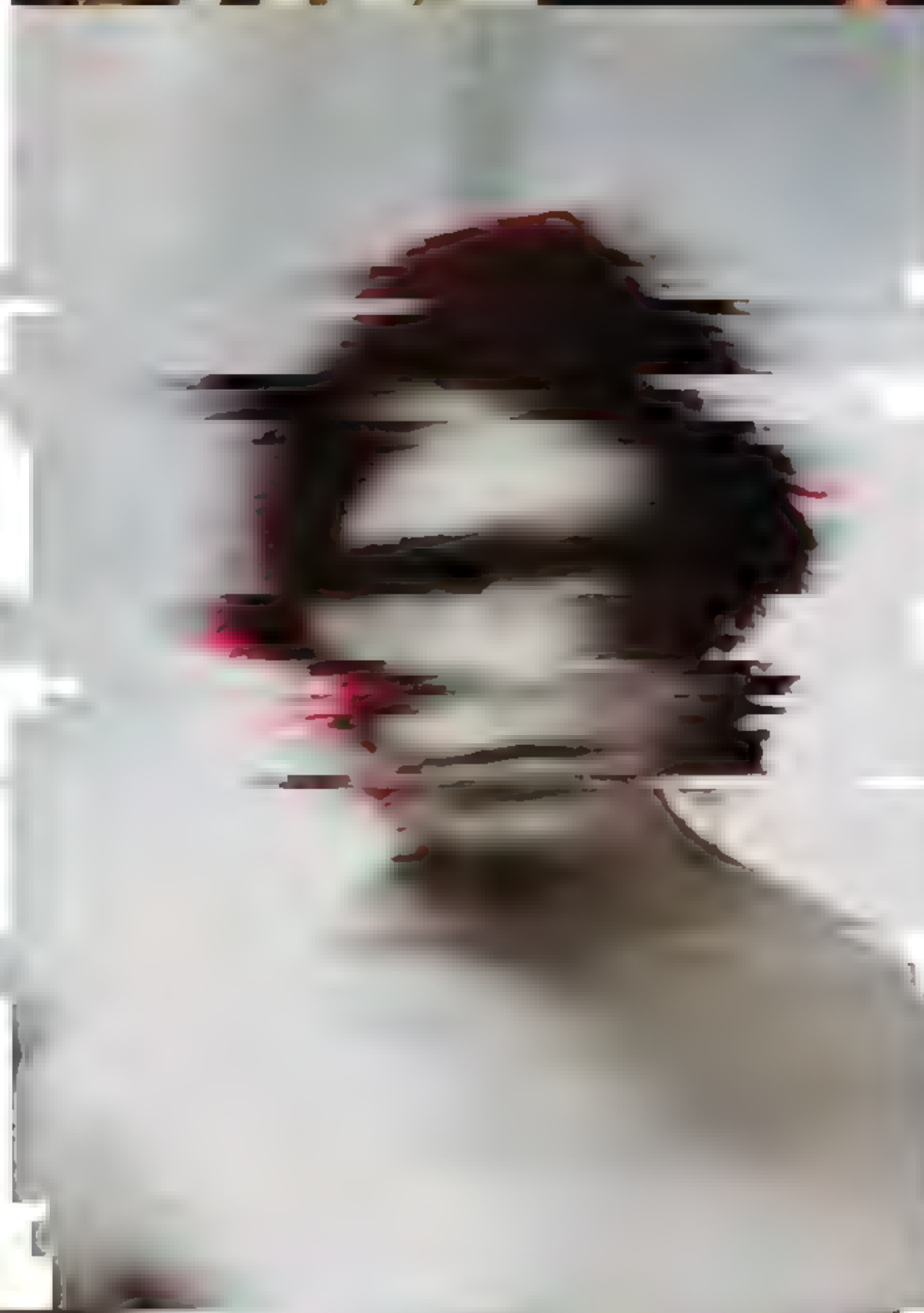
"The main thing for me is that I've never pushed this," he explains. "I never wanted to be this band that was across all social media, begging you to listen. And I feel like, honestly, it's nearly mission complete at this point. Every single music video, every single press thing or shoot... it might take time, but in my head I want everything to be the best it could possibly be. If you're not winning, you're losing. And who wants to lose?"

**T**HE STATIC DRESS sound amalgamates a lot of modern rock's best bits: The Used doing The 1975's disembodied vocals, Taking Back Sunday choruses with brutal Underoath breakdowns, hints of Bring Me The Horizon's sticky cybergoth via the enigmatic androgyny of Brian Molko or Gerard Way (and Appleyard somehow looks similar to both of those rock icons). By curating all these elements and restitching them into something sleeker, Static Dress have forged a sound and image that feels much more singular, futuristic even.

Although their polish has invoked whispers of the industry plant, the truth is as far from that as it is possible to be. Their rise is one of serious graft.

A keen drummer, skater – and upon injury, a skate photographer – Appleyard was a multi-hyphenate right out of the gates, putting on shows in Leeds and networking with the endearing naiveté of someone who just really wanted to be around music. Having taught himself composition with the family's old VHS recorder, he made a name for himself as a gig photographer, becoming coveted by local venues for his unique visual perspective.

"I didn't have anything like [Leeds rock venue] Key Club in my life, and I loved it. I'd drive there, work till 2am, then drive home and go to college the next day. When they needed photographers for Slam Dunk







**TO BE THE BEST**  
Perfection is  
the watchword  
for Static Dress

festival, I shot all of it, met all my favourite bands, and was genuinely like a kid in a candy shop," he remembers. Soon, he was shooting full visual campaigns for international bands, helping them to craft their own narratives.

Around this time, Appleyard's family moved from Bradford to Bingley, a small town that he describes as painfully narrow-minded. He has never publicly disclosed his sexuality, but his chosen mode of dress was enough to invoke casual homophobia, highlighting the judgemental nature of a scene that he is keen to leave behind.

"My DMs are always full of people giving me shit," he reveals. "There are pages set up to be anti-me, like 'Keep F-bombs out of hardcore.'" He mentions the *We Wear Black* podcast, helmed by three rock journalists of colour who speak up about gender and racial issues within alternative rock. "They're all fucking smashing it, and I'm so glad.

**"Everyone who  
shouldn't be there,  
the racists and  
homophobes, will  
get uncomfortable,  
and they'll  
fuck off or learn  
to acclimatise"**

The scene really needs that presence. I feel like everyone who shouldn't be there, the fucking racists and homophobes, will get uncomfortable, and they'll either fuck off or learn to acclimatise."

Like many great bands, there is a lot about Static Dress that feels designed to disturb the status quo. Ever since they began, they have distanced themselves from labels, or even full personal identification; Appleyard refuses to confirm his age, while guitarist Contrast performs behind a mask, a decision chosen for both personal comfort and "why the hell not" theatrics.

Deeply invested in folklore, they tease every announcement with a complex map of clues and riddles, fuelling a sizeable reddit community who pore over their imagery to try and decipher the codes. Every element of the band's messaging is planned out meticulously in advance; at one



**“For me, I don’t  
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I don’t want  
you listening to  
my music”**

point in our conversation, Appleyard pulls out a “shortlist” of potential band names from 2019, taking at least five full scrolls to get down to Static Dress. Video treatments require similar imaginative storyboarding: “The one thing I never want to do is shoot a video where someone can go ‘Oh yeah, that’s Bingley’ – you can’t just go and be on set of *The Matrix*, you know?”

His main driver, he says, is to always maintain a special quality, an antithesis to the fleeting, algorithmic pleasures of our modern age. Static Dress are for the nerds, the fans like Appleyard who “geek out over everything”. At this point, we’re in the Hepworth café, and he holds out his empty cup by way of illustration. “It’s like, if I just came up to you and explained this album

that’s coming out, you’d be like, ‘OK, cool.’ But if I just go, ‘There’s that’ – he pushes the cup towards me – “and I won’t tell you what ‘that’ is, you’re going to walk away and get annoyed. You’ll come back to it and obsess over it more. And it’s that obsession that I want to try and create.

“For me” – he pauses dramatically, seemingly pondering whether he really wants to commit to this in print – “I don’t want fans that don’t want to scratch beneath the surface of things. If you’re just gonna be like, swipe, swipe, swipe, I don’t want you listening to my music. All the labels and music executives want you to do is bump up Spotify numbers. I ain’t fucking arsed about that in the slightest.”







**F**OR AN INTENTIONALLY alien creature, Appleyard likes to remain informed of what the Earthlings are up to. Our chat ranges from Architects to Charli XCX to Busted to Bad Boy Chiller Crew, a member of whom lived mere streets away from him growing up. His favourite artist is The Weeknd, a person he applauds for always daring to go full concept. If it's unlike what everyone else is doing, Appleyard is here for it, admiring any artist that is focused on driving their own momentum.

Having envisaged his own album from day dot, he was excited to make good on his own full-length moment, the next stage of his creative blueprint. But when it was time to record it, he found himself faltering, struggling under the weight of bandmates who didn't seem as sure as he was.

"In hindsight, it was people just not being committed to stuff or not being in the right headspace because of Covid," he says. "It's sad because you grew up with these people, you're best friends, but if you can't muscle on and get through it..."

**ENIGMA**

Appleyard likes to keep people guessing



**MAKING A  
SCENE**  
(From left)  
Contrast, Sam  
Ogden,  
Connor Reilly  
and Appleyard







Amid difficult personal circumstances that he'd prefer to keep to himself, Appleyard entered what he describes as one of the most traumatic periods of his life. Spiralling into near-hallucinatory breakdown, he began wondering what all his efforts had been for. "I had lost 90 per cent of my friends and couldn't trust anyone. Within the band, we got [into] this horrible cycle of me always wanting to do more, and them not wanting to do it at all."

Lost in this sea of "horrible-as-fuck toxicity", he tried hard to find his way back to shore. A three-week stint in a Welsh cottage with producer Erik Bickerstaffe (of metalcore band Loathe) yielded 10 of the album's songs, with singles 'Di-sinTer' and 'Such A Shame' coming in late as an emblem of the album's intentional sonic versatility. It was a relief, but Appleyard remained a victim of his own exacting standards, agonising over vocal takes.

"There was one day where I was in a cupboard just trying to do all the parts for 'Welcome In', rewriting and rewriting it," he says. "I was in there for nine hours until Erik got me out. I owe a lot to that guy, for real. But because I hate everything I do, it's kind of helpful in a sense; this album is basically me being like, 'I can't do anything more.' This was all done on a budget, without a label, and it's a product of the people who have been involved with this band from day one. That for me is a massive, massive thing."

With *Rouge Carpet Disaster* diverted from near catastrophe, the group have been able to re-focus on Appleyard's initial intention of building loyalty through lore, dedication through detail. Nothing was wasted in its process; *Prologue*, recorded in three months post-album amid tours and festivals, was put out into the world in late November, a comic book/soundtrack project that offered a deep dive into the folklore of the band's early world, its outro seamlessly transitioning into the new record.

With album-release shows looming, Appleyard is bursting with ideas of how to present things live, excusing him from the awkwardness of mid-set promotion. "You know, all that 'like and subscribe, hit that notification bell' stuff – fuck off! I know you've got to do it, but the amount of times on that Funeral for a Friend tour that I'd say something and then instantly be like, 'Shoot me in the fucking head...'"

Somewhat unsurprisingly, he has already

**"There was one  
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begun work on album two. With *Rouge Carpet Disaster*, he wanted to prove that Static Dress could be "a solid band", but with the next one, he'll be digging deeper into new-wave emo, opting for even richer soundscapes.

"I'll have that phase, and then album three will be stupid heavy breakdowns, and album four will be pop as hell, my own 'Dawn FM'," he laughs. "And then at the same time, it will all look super amazing." With a new line-up settled in, he feels confident in the band's future: "Everyone wants the same things now. I might be steering the ship, but now I've got other hands on the wheel."

At this point, we've been talking for several hours. The Hepworth is closing, and

Appleyard apologises for his lack of brevity, worrying that in previous interviews he's come across like "a bit of an arrogant dick". Far from it; what he has is passion, a complex battle of ambition and provocation raging as he tries to match up the proverbial oranges and blues. He's smart enough to know that people tend to listen on shuffle now, if they listen to a full album at all, and understands that there will come a time where he will have to adapt his creative process to let others in and learn to get more comfortable with the act of self-promotion. Having spent so long establishing Static Dress as an intentionally cult band, Appleyard's next challenge will be one of scale. When *Rouge Carpet Disaster* drops, there will be bigger stages, longer reddit threads, more high-profile interviews. How can one hope to maintain mystery – and sanity – on that ascent?

"I don't know any other pace," he says, plainly. "I'm in this to try to help people. And that's not me being a do-gooder, that absolute fucking white-knight-in-a-plaid-shirt syndrome. There's already plenty of that. But honestly, the main message that I want to get across is this is an album to make you want to start your own thing, by a band who are trying to be something more than just your run of the mill."

"On paper, it shouldn't work, but that's the point of this. It's artists making music, not musicians making art." He laughs, pleased with his phrasing. "That's a good line. You can print that shit!" Knowing him, it won't be long before he's thought up something even better. ☺



# 30 and Falling

## **The new female frontier of emotional intelligence in pop**

An ageist music industry often forces female pop stars to retire gracefully from the stage or to rely on their personal brand to survive. Recently, millennial artists like Adele, Hayley Williams, Florence Welch and Self Esteem are articulating a new kind of life experience in their work: the personal devastation and emotional maturing that typically happens around the age of 30

**By Hannah Ewens**

ALAMY, ISTOCK, LINDSEY BYRNES







**O**N A PLANE as a child, I asked my mum why the flight attendants told us to take the brace position. Her answer was not convincing: in case something fell on me, to protect my head. Later, once I had access to the internet, I sought the real reason: if there was a crash, it would break your neck and kill you instantly. But this fatalistic conspiracy theory has since been debunked – it's really to reduce flailing; to stop you lashing out and hurting yourself.

I often think about that when someone I know is going through destabilising change over a series of moments, weeks, months. Mentally, we use a similar method of self-protection: we will thrash and lie to ourselves and do almost anything to withstand an emotional fall, to overcome the uncertainty of where we will land, and only hurt ourselves in the process.

As you reach the latter end of your twenties, your personal life as you know it often comes to an end, whether consciously or subconsciously by your hand (and we socially agree to call it circumstance or “just bad luck”). For some, the passage of time has a consolidatory effect; events continue to slot into place in the way they should, or as we would wish them to. Career people have their big break, happy couples get married and/or have babies. Increasingly, though, for many of us – pop stars included – this second puberty that takes place around the age of 30 involves a semi-dramatic life re-ordering that we'd rather ignore.

For Hayley Williams, the reaction to this shift was uncharacteristically picking at her appearance on her wedding day; writing dark, portending lyrics about her then husband on the Paramore album *After Laughter*; sitting in the tub with a bottle of champagne on tour feeling her anger and sadness seep into the water as her best friends played games together next door; leaving her marriage, home and possessions behind and sleeping on a mattress on the floor of an unfamiliar new house.

For Adele, it was drifting through her days feeling disconnected from her sense of self; a magazine quiz with her friends, reaching the question: “What's something no one would ever know about you?” and answering “I'm really not happy”; waking up one morning after her birthday and seeing a “tsunami of emotions” coming for her; regularly explaining divorce to her young son.

For me, it was doubling over in public from the foreshocks of heartbreak and shrugging it off; waking up on friends' sofas before work at my new job; the sort of circular, fraught conversations about getting back together that you inevitably have when you're forced back

into close quarters; hearing the front door close, falling to my knees and crying “Why!” at the sky, a tableau of pain so ridiculously comical I had previously imagined it only belonged in bad films or children's cartoons.

Eventually, there is clarity. My 30th birthday was a cerebral exorcism: I woke up with a wet face knowing that a web of subtle thoughts and behaviour had to change. Technically, I suppose, it was a choice to end unhelpful ways, but it felt more like knowledge that had been calcifying in my body for years suddenly filled my bones like fluorescent marrow.

Society calls this becoming a ‘grown-up’. Although much has been written about millennials maturing late due to our lack of money, material possessions or career progression in the wake of the recession, Brexit or the Covid pandemic, this age has always been a significant milestone. As pop star Charli XCX said in her interview with Zane Lowe to promote her recent album about break-ups and sex – notably called *Crash* – she's at the end of an era in her life and career: “Obviously, age is just a number, but I'm going to be 30 in August and that does feel like this sort of societal age of ‘now

you're an adult, do adult things; twenties are over, what's happening with your life?’”

Psychology calls this transition individuating, while in astrology, it's known as a Saturn return, when the planet returns to the position it was in when you were born for the first time. (Adele says she went through the transit ahead of writing *30*, half-joking: “It's where I lost the plot.”)

Regardless, all this refers to the same era: the “lessons” of your young adulthood and subsequent life changes come to fruition and you start again, wiser, surer of what you want, more deeply feeling but faintly deranged, like Nicole Kidman in those 2001 post-divorce paparazzi photos – naturally, she was in her early thirties.

**W**HEN WE'RE TALKING about women and pop music, the latter has historically been a game played by and for teen girls and young women. In her 2018 profile on Robyn, critic Laura Snapes wrote of the ‘Dancing On My Own’ superstar, then approaching her late thirties: “Her situation highlights one of the paradoxes of pop: so much of the business is built on selling the kind of

**“I’m going to be 30 in. August and that does feel like ‘now you’re an adult, do adult things; twenties are over, what’s happening with your life?’”**



**CROSSROADS**  
Charli XCX has revealed how she feels about turning 30

JACK BRIDGLAND



self-belief that only truly comes with age, yet few artists are allowed to mature on their own terms." She notes that longevity for women means disappearing into the background to write for younger artists or aggressively protecting their existing personal brand.

Following the logic of the industry, pop's remit is the euphoric world of partying, lust and first heartbreak. It has only recently become more thematically diverse, with artists as varied as Beyoncé and Neneh Cherry helping to change that. In 2018, the same year as Snakes' profile, Jude Rogers wrote in her essay 'How Pop Stars Are Growing Up Gracefully': "Pop's standard currency, until now, was always aspirational fantasy, not nuanced reality. It never really allowed itself to enter the real world before. Or perhaps the suits never really allowed it."

Reality is, in some ways, a synonym for adult. Over the decades, female fans and critics over 30 have frequently commented that pop music is not for them, not speaking to them and questioned whether there is music in the mainstream catering to them at all. The terrible age has been referenced in pop songs like Lily Allen's '22' and Amy Winehouse's 'Fuck Me Pumps' as an embarrassing, almost threatening milestone, beyond which a woman's value deteriorates, to be saved only by marriage and domesticity.

Since the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, a host of mainstream millennial female pop artists like Hayley Williams, Adele, Self Esteem and Florence Welch have written about navigating that difficult transition out of their twenties and the challenge to negotiate a different future for themselves in their next decade of existence. Their work illustrates a newer type of female self-actualisation, reflective of the culture, one that's about romantic relationships but also what women must do to thrive and grow emotionally. It's pop-leaning music that arguably exists to speak directly to women of a similar age. In an interview with Zane Lowe, Adele even said, "If everyone's making music for the TikTok, who's making music for my generation, for my peers? I'll do that job gladly. I'd rather cater to people that are on my level in terms of the time we've spent on Earth."

Our dominant mode of consuming pop culture now, a hang-up from the 2010s, is one of relatability. We automatically home in on who or what we are supposed to assign to the self and what art means for us as individuals. A part of why these albums have been so critically successful is down to the fresh familiarity of the stories they tell.

I'm not sure whether it's that pop music has expanded to contain multitudes so much as the conditions in which these artists are having this grand entry into adulthood allows



#### OUT TO PASTURE?

According to the youth-obsessed music industry, Robyn and others over 30 are too old to be pop stars

the exploration. They're part of a generation more exposed to therapy than the women who came before, who raised us. Ideally, we know when we're being terrible or dysfunctional just as well as when our partner or relationship is and have the Instagram infographics and self-help language to navigate that if we want to change it. We can identify how we're feeling and are encouraged to leave difficult or dangerous situations, whether at work or home.

Simultaneously, the girlboss feminism of the 2010s pummelled it into us that as a woman you can do life all on your own. By the time we gathered the emotional maturity and experience to look after ourselves, we realised you can't grow much of a future by yourself today, financially or emotionally, through a pandemic,

economic strife and climate crises. There are some things you can't achieve outside of a pair. Your thirties become about finding ways to reckon with that: stabilising, building, sacrificing. And then there is really nothing like romantic love at its best: feminism and pop culture have never really showed us what that could be.

This is the collective psychological landscape in which women seek to assess their most intimate relationships with others as well as their relationships with themselves.

**I**T'S A COOL thing to be coming of age again," Williams tells me. "We all have it coming into our twenties but there's really something about the [late twenties] and beginning



of your thirties that you can't explain to your 18-year-old self – nobody can explain it to you when you're that age because you're not even supposed to have the same world view. To me, if we don't have the chance to express the extreme feelings as teenagers and twenties, then we're not understanding the full breadth of our emotional range."

Both Hayley Williams' *Petals for Armor* and Adele's *30* work chronologically – Williams released hers in EP chapters – to chart emotional growth from romantic devastation to a sense of fullness, or at least hard-won knowledge. On the lead single 'Simmer', we meet Williams naked and running from something or someone through a forest. "*Rage is a quiet thing*," she sings. Before this age, Williams says, you don't have all the "tools in your belt to understand the world and that there are things you can do about it: that you don't have to stay in an abusive cycle, you don't have to stay in a moment that feels like you need to die." Something of a consolidation of experience is happening up to this point so that action can take place.

The record leans on feminine symbols like nature and flowers blooming and her emancipation is found through solitude and making a new home, one that demands that she fully exist in her body. "*Home is where I'm feminine / Smells like citrus and cinnamon*" she sings on 'Cinnamon' and exalts, "*I'm not lonely, baby, I am free / Mmm, finally*." By the second half, the journey has shifted to one of sex and play: in the video for 'Over Yet', a buoyant call-to-arms for anyone struggling, Williams dances in her lounge wearing a T-shirt that reads 'Pure Pleasure'.

Like this lean into femininity and the home, Adele references old romance and notions of feminine glamour. *30* opens with a Judy Garland-style track, 'Strangers By Nature', that twinkles underneath Adele's Hollywood vocals. Like Dorothy walking out into an unknown land, such is the nature of this new frontier of life: "*I've never seen the sky this colour before / It's like I'm noticing everythin' a little bit more*."

My favourite track on the album, one that never fails to draw out goosebumps on my forearms, is the penultimate piano ballad 'To Be Loved'. In it, Adele owns how the responsibility for a better relationship is mostly on her shoulders: "*It's about time that I face myself / All I do is bleed into someone else*." The central message is that of *30* in its entirety: the rupture of her divorce and heartbreak had to happen for her to progress into a greater love for both herself and someone else: "*To be loved and love at the highest count / Means to lose all the things I can't live without*." The song posits that operating relationally at the previous level wasn't enough. It doesn't know what the "more" is, but it knows it's out there.

Pleasure is a key mode of exploration for Self

**"The record feels tense with the issue of whether female artists are too selfish to bring life into the world"**

Esteem, just as it is for Williams. The British pop star's album *Prioritise Pleasure* was celebrated for outlining how womanhood still feels like constantly juggling contradictory terms: be impactful but not threatening, be carefree but care about the needs of everyone around you, be yourself but conform. For many women of this age, taught to gravitate around their loved ones and others like a desperate planet, the nagging feeling that you're running out of time to do what you want reaches an apex. There is a way out. In the video for 'I Do This All the Time', the singer

embraces a carbon copy of herself and hugs her tightly. "*Don't be intimidated by all the babies they have / Don't be embarrassed that all you've had is fun / Prioritise pleasure*," she instructs herself.

The eternal question of babies or life still plagues women when it often feels that men can just be men. Welch opens her new album *Dance Fever* with the lines: "*We argue in the kitchen about whether to have children / About the world ending and the scale of my ambition / And how much is art really worth*." Much of the record feels tense with the issue



SELF ESTEEM

DEAN EVAN MCCALL



**WRITTEN IN THE STARS** Adele has attributed her painful divorce to her Saturn return



of whether female artists are too selfish to bring human life into the world or even have great relationships. On 'Dream Girl Evil', a wry song about the projections and fantasies men place on girlfriends and wives, she asks either a male partner or the general public or both: "Did I disappoint you? Did Mummy make you sad?" These are two lines in which so much of the uneasy feeling of heterosexuality today is captured: modern men are feminists and fundamentally more aware of their mental health and emotions, but that is often as far as it goes; the expectation is still for women to be wife, maid, mother and therapist to them, to over-function in a way that perpetuates our conditioning.

Like Williams, Self Esteem and Florence

Welch repeatedly call out "I'm free" on their albums. Women being given the space – and radio air play – to express such nuanced feelings gently destabilises the unimaginative force that

## "The expectation is still for women to be wife, maid, mother and therapist"

pushes us towards playing these set roles of the past. Across all of these artists' works, there is a complex mixture of anger, joy, gratitude, regret, promise – no singular mood pop songs – and an embracing of this almost classical femininity, which has been untrendy in culture for many years. They each gesture towards a vision of

femininity as an embodiment of rich emotions.

"Emotions are cyclical but I think unless you let yourself feel them, you stay on the one, and you don't get to experience the rest," Williams explains to me. "So, with Adele and Florence – plenty of others too, those are just the most popular examples – it's cool seeing women speak into existence these nuanced things about existing in the world. Because we have younger generations of people who are learning how to use their anger and raw energy and they need to be able to look at people who have experienced that and are now in a different era of their life."

Of herself and women her age, she observes, "We're trying to grab on the reins in a different way. It doesn't mean we're not angry any more – there's a lot in the world to be angry about every day – but it's having the full palette at your disposal."

**I**T WOULDN'T BE a fairy tale without a happy ending and although these artists offer complicated conclusions, they are full of hope. Each exits the frame with more than a *Fleabag* "and in the end I realised my true love was... me" millennial moment (though that's part of it).

With knowledge and self-respect, this music suggests you can make a different relationship with someone new, something suited to the person you are becoming underneath the unhealthy patterns as you learn to truly communicate for the first time.

On 'Taken', Williams honours a fated romance that happened at that pivotal age: "Might've taken thirty years / But I was always on my way to him." The promise of a lasting connection continues with album closer, 'Crystal Clear'. Over golden synths and a sample of Williams' grandfather playing a love song he wrote for his grandmother, a woman he'd been with since they were 12, Williams is peacefully optimistic. In Paramore songs, she previously used water and drowning as metaphors when speaking about relationships; here she is floating. "This don't feel anything like sinking," she sings of the reward for her self-actualisation. "In fact, no matter how deep I go / Into you, it looks like the water is crystal clear."

What feeling did she want to evoke at the end of the album? "Falling in love," she said in an interview with *Pitchfork*. "Emphasis on the falling – because despite my fear, my toughness, or any resistance to vulnerability, I couldn't help falling in love."

If your thirtieth year is no longer far away and you feel the psychological pressure building, know that you're at the 'running naked through a forest' stage and the ground will clear. As for advice, I don't know what else to tell you besides the obvious: try not to take it personally as your outer world falls apart to accommodate whatever is happening inside you. Then put your hands over your head and brace for impact. @







A person wearing a red jacket is visible on the left side of the image, partially obscured by bright stage lights. The background is dark, and the overall atmosphere is that of a concert or performance.

# BAD BOYS DONE GOOD

HAVING PROVED THEMSELVES TO BE MORE THAN A COMEDY ACT, BRADFORD'S BAD BOY CHILLER CREW ARE STILL WINNING. ON THE OPENING HOMECOMING NIGHTS OF THEIR *DISRESPECTFUL* ALBUM TOUR, ROLLING STONE UK STEPS INSIDE THEIR WORLD OF BASSLINE, BUCKET HATS AND WORKING-CLASS JUBILATION

BY **JENESSA WILLIAMS**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JAMIE MACMILLAN**



ONIGHT, WE BRING you breaking news. Five men from Bradford are on the run after breaking out of a local studio. Three have been identified as Kane, Clive and GK, also known as the clean-cut boy band, Bad Boy Chiller Crew. Alongside them is an accomplice who goes by the name of Kitchen Steve, and a man in a balaclava who has been identified as Tactics. Approach with caution.”

Inside Leeds O2 Academy, the gang of wisecracking renegades are sound-checking the faux ITV news broadcast that will begin tonight’s gig. Despite the comedy intro, the main trio’s professionalism is startling as they move into their first song: heads down, bars out, ducking and weaving around the motorbikes and oil drums that fill the stage. Somehow, without anyone really clocking the change, all three have become genuine stars.

Clive, GK and Kane are all still trying to figure out exactly how they’ve gone from being Yorkshire’s best-kept secret to a mainstream disturbance. Coming off the back of their February mixtape *Disrespectful* (which hit No. 2 in the album charts), their brand has shifted smoothly from viral comedy videos to legitimate musicianship, embracing a style of bassline that has gone broadly unloved since the early 00s. The masses snaking around the venue suggest that their plan has worked. Upstairs in the dressing room, they insist that the key to tour preparation is one of blissful ignorance; in the words of Nike, they just do it.

“I haven’t even read the tour sheets, don’t even know what venues we’re doing. I just turn up,” says Kane. “If you think about it, you just send your head.”

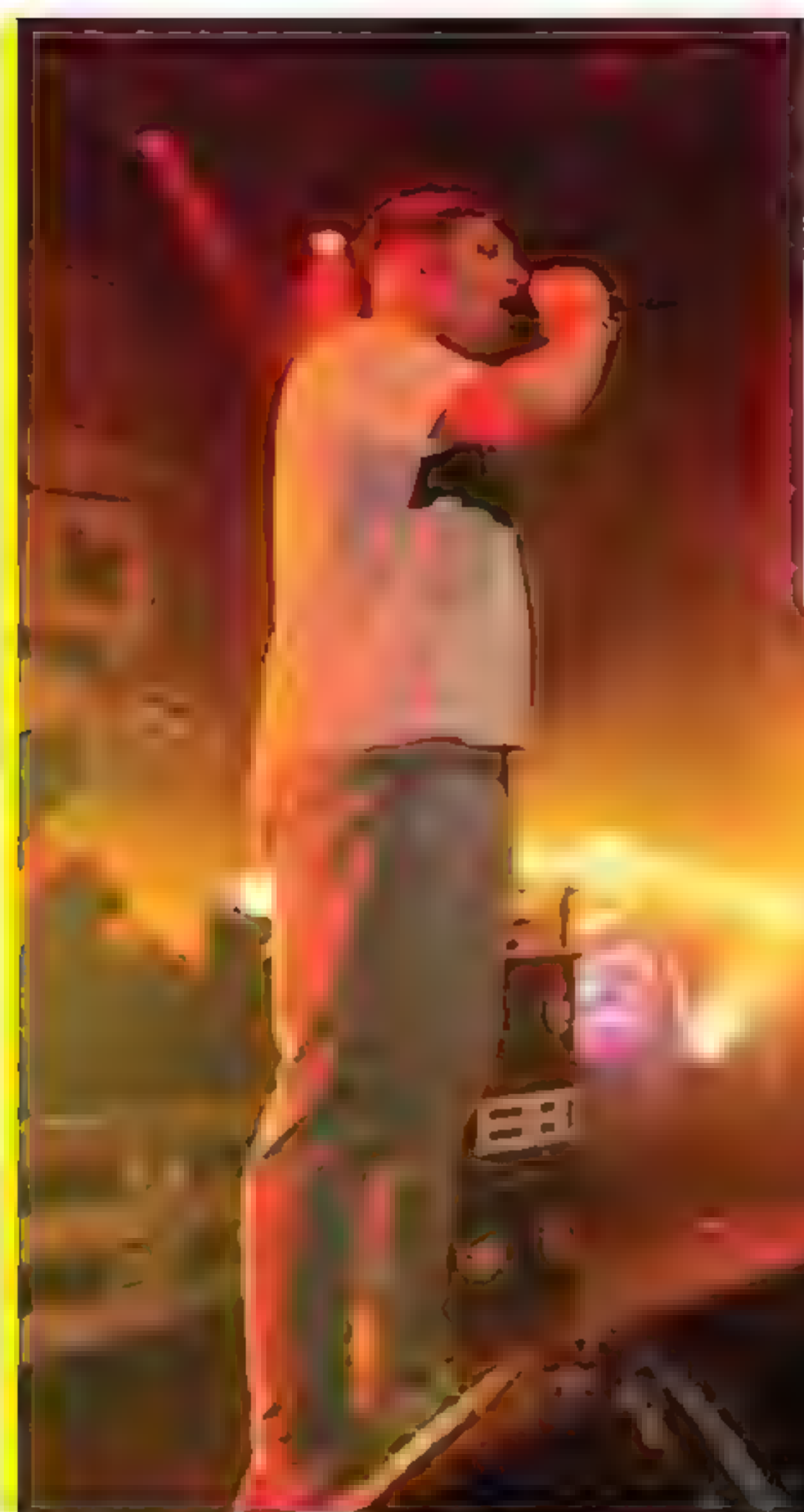
“I don’t even know the songs!” agrees GK. “Last time we did this we were all

losing sleep. This time, we’ll just drink it off and hope for the best.” He plucks a fancy protein smoothie off the side table, a new addition to their rider. “We’ve got these now, so we don’t have to eat. You can stay up on the beers and still have all the nutrition.”

Is this a new sponsor?

“No, I wish! Fucking hell, they’re six quid a bottle, them!”

It’s difficult to write about Bad Boy Chiller Crew without acknowledging three things: laughter, drink and drugs. All three boys talk like sports commentators, loud and fast, sentences colliding in their enthusiasm. When something



**Sing it back**

Playing to their home crowd at O2 Academy Leeds





**Check this out**  
GK in his signature  
Burberry finery

is funny, it is unanimously, raucously so; when a point needs to be made, it is repeated thrice, often framed with a definitive introduction (“do you know what it is, yeah?”). Everything about them teeters on a parody of excess – GK’s head-to-toe Burberry, the 50:50 ratio of Grey Goose and Coca-Cola that Kane slops into a pint glass, Clive’s signature mullet. And yet there is something to admire in how they hold themselves. Amid the japes and bravado, BBCC are sincere in their desire to do well.

“This is a serious tour,” nods GK. “Jaws can’t be swinging when you’re taking pictures with kids at a meet-and-greet.” He’s learnt his new restraint the hard way; things got a little out of hand back in February when a fan threw an ounce of ketamine onstage at an album release show. “I went to Dewsbury hospital with a kidney infection,” he reveals. “Felt like I’d sat on an egg. It was only a week’s tour and we completely wrote ourselves off.”

It would be difficult for BBCC to maintain their current trajectory without maturing along the way. Off the back of their grassroots success, they signed to Sony Music, a cash injection that has allowed them to go large with the things that matter: big dance sample clearances, video budgets, touring capabilities.

Although Kane can identify a clear stylistic shift from their breakout single ‘450’ to now, he is adamant that their original rough’n’ready spirit remains. He recalls an argument with their label over their latest single ‘BMW’ which resulted in him screaming down the phone.

“We were going back and forth ‘cos they started changing things. But when I kicked off and they stuck to what we had, it went top 10. We know what we’re doing.” He pauses, breathless but jubilant. “Some of the stuff we’re working on now, you wouldn’t believe.”

OUTSIDE OF MUSIC, their new-found fame has brought significant perks. All three have got into cars and there’s a garage at their home full of discarded toys: quad bikes, go-carts, a mobility scooter with a motorbike engine fitted. Housing itself has been a bit more of an issue – if it wasn’t already clear, Bad Boy Chiller Crew enjoy a party and have trashed their way out of several lodgings. They’ve recently decamped to a new city, although they politely ask that we do not disclose where. Fans have a habit of finding out where they live and, mistaking their banter for a lack of boundaries, think nothing of knocking on the door for a photo. Clive tells a story of a cleaner who ended up livestreaming her whole visit on TikTok, boasting about the band.

“She filmed every single room in the house, scruffy as fuck, the address, everything.” He laughs despite his annoyance, respecting the hustle. “People are fucked, aren’t they?”

**“It was only a week’s tour and we completely wrote ourselves off”**

**— GK**

The disparity between their ascending wealth and humble origins has led to some soul-searching. They’ve worked hard for what they have but fear that they were “showing off” in the early days and became too focused on the wrong things. “I used to be a fucker for it, but now I’m just thinking, ‘Look, I’m representing the council estates,’” states GK.

Kane adds: “They don’t have fuck all, and I’m still one of them. It’s come to that point now where, as long as we’re entertaining people, that’s the best thing. The times we’re living in, everyone’s just sick to death. Everyone just wants to have a laugh.”

With Clive long wandered off and GK floating in and out, Kane finally gets his moment to share the music he’s been itching to show off. He hooks his phone to a speaker and asks me what I want to hear. I mention a clip that they teased on Instagram a few days prior, a summery one about doubts in a relationship.

“I told you you wouldn’t expect it,” he beams, music blasting as he mouths along to his bars. “You can only waffle so much shite, can’t you?” he reasons. “We’ve got all the rowdy stuff already. You can’t have a whole load of headbangers all the way through.”

Like a collector with an enviable set of Panini stickers, he’s failing miserably at his impression of nonchalance, but he has every reason to be excited. To my ears, Bad Boy Chiller Crew are sitting on some of their best work yet, gently easing them out of bassline into all-encompassing garage.







**“Today  
someone  
asked  
Shaun to  
shave their  
cat. They’re  
as mental  
as we are”  
— Kane**

AS EVENING FALLS, the band reconvene for their meet-and-greet, sunglasses on but jaws still intact. The process is simple but diligent, a chorus of cheerful small talk: “What’s your name, love?”, “Take it easy, bro!”, “Have a good night, yeah?”. Clive leads the tiny fist bumps with the kids, turning their usual photo-op middle finger into a PG-friendly thumbs-up. Many attendees are ridiculously young; one lad surely no older than three strides in ahead of his mum, a picture of toddler testosterone. He says nothing, gets his photo, and then marches off with the energy of a cage fighter looking for his next tussle. Two girls follow, also saying very little but audibly squealing as soon as they are back out of the doors.

Inside the gig space, a sea of lights from camera phones projects a strange daytime hue. Boys and girls circle each other in Joop-scented packs, too shy to chat each other up but content to exist in the same orbit. Vapes and mullets, flat caps and spray tans, bucket hats and Poundshop glowsticks. A remix of ‘Show Me Love’ booms from the PA and a loud hum of gleeful adolescence fills the room.

At 9pm, the ITV news report rings out, and it’s showtime. Screams reverberate as BBCC begin with ‘So Much in Love’, a romantic banger



#### Bradford crew

Kane, Clive and GK are bonded by a shared love of beer, banter and the music

that is delivered with razor-sharp accuracy. In a frenetic, hour-long set, there are some stumbles – a few forgotten bars, a creeping sense of fatigue as the familiar BPM wears on. They soon pull it back with ‘450’, the biggest smash in their oeuvre and a clear instruction to go mad. As Clive downs his drink and producer Tactics hoists gun fingers back into the air, the overall feeling is one of unruly escapism. The aggressive-looking toddler from the meet-and-greet is hanging off the top-tier seating. Another is downstairs on his dad’s shoulders, swaying expertly in the mosh pit as he eats a bag of crisps. You simply don’t get this sort of thing down south.

**T**he next afternoon, the weather is promising and the group are out on the terrace. GK is unable to resist the urge to tweak the privacy curtain and unleash the screams that are waiting below. He’s been goading the bootleg merch sellers, imploring people to only shop inside. “You wouldn’t want to give your kids nits, would ya?”

With friends and touring team abuzz, tonight’s show was the first to sell out. There is a sense that it will be the proper one, tightening up on last night. They thought they’d been pre-drinking at a sensible pace, but as the gig grew closer, Kane realised that he was, in fact, “mashed”. “I didn’t think I were that bad during our interview, but we got on stage and I was like ‘Err,’” he admits, with the decency to look vaguely chastised. “That’s why we always play with the backing tracks. We’re too much of a risk.”

There’s some credit to be clawed from their honesty, and yet it doesn’t change the fact that Bad Boy Chiller Crew have become role models to a huge youth fanbase of Brits. It’s not necessarily a responsibility that they asked for, but amid all the drinking and swearing, what are they hoping that kids are getting from their music?

“Just enjoyment, innit,” says Kane. “As you get older, you don’t get as excited by much. You





**Garage band**

Bad Boy Chiller Crew's  
brand of bassline  
reinvigorates the genre



**Teen spirit**

The band have become  
unlikely role models for  
their youthful fanbase









**“As you get older, you don’t get as excited by much, so let ‘em buzz off it now”**  
**— Kane**

an easy way to give back. “I might have to dip into it meself on the way home,” quips Clive. “There’s nowt but beans in my fridge.” The trademark group laughter rings out, followed by a chorus of huffing smokers’ coughs. This only causes more laughs and hence more coughs. “Fucking hell!”

Clive is often good for a punchline, but today he looks calmer, if admittedly knackered. He and his partner have not long had a baby and last night he was responsible for the 2am feed. “I’ll do that shift, but then I’ll start fake snoring to get out of the next one,” he jokes. Working by night and raising a newborn is proving a challenge but he feels he’s settling into it. “It’ll be nice when he’s old enough to bring along,” he smiles. “He loves being held, so I’ll put him in the carrier and bounce him about to the tunes.”

One day in Bad Boy Chiller Crew’s future, they know that some of their decadence will have to be curbed. No party lasts for ever; there are kids to be raised, livers to be healed, money to be invested in something more reliable than turbo-mobility scooters. But underneath all the downed drinks and the non-PC wisecracks, there is something quite powerful about their deep-seated desire to put some fun out into a world that often feels anything but. Sooner rather than later, resistance to their cause will be futile. For now, why not embrace life on the run? @

lose the fun, so fucking let ‘em buzz off it now. The ones from around here, they love it, know the raps better than we do. With the meet-and-greets, we get everyone. Today, someone asked Clive to shave their cat. They’re all as mental as we are.”

Despite the chaos, some societal good did prevail. A foodbank trolley outside the venue was filled with donations, offering up the chance to win one of BBCC’s custom motorbikes. It’s an initiative they are proud of, one that will continue throughout the tour as

#### **All for one**

Kane, Clive and GK have honed their craft and whatever’s next, they’re more than ready



# On being completely and utterly vicious

LOUIS PARTRIDGE ON  
PLAYING INFAMOUS SEX  
PISTOL BASSIST SID  
VICIOUS IN UPCOMING  
DRAMA PISTOL AND  
FACING UP TO FAME

BY MARK SUTHERLAND







# Louis Partridge is getting used to life's extremes. At the start of 2022,

he hit Hollywood and found himself being wine and dined on £50 burgers at celeb haunt, The Beverly Hills Hotel. "Then, the very next day, I was slumming it in a £9-a-night Airbnb in Colombia," he laughs. "But I can appreciate both, they both have their advantages..."

Partridge's two-and-a-half-month trip to Colombia and Brazil was part of a belated "gap year thing" with his best mate, and doubled as research for his next, as-yet-unannounced project. Their break took in the rainforest, the beaches and "a lot of lounging", but also "a few scrapes" ("Our friend got mugged quite badly, but I managed to avoid it, thank God," he explains).

You also suspect it might be his last chance to enjoy an anonymous holiday for a while. Because the thing that was keeping this 18-year-old busy throughout his A-levels and beyond was the new Sex Pistols biopic series, *Pistol*, directed by Danny Boyle. With a Disney+ premiere on 31 May, it is likely to make Partridge and the rest of the cast half as famous as the musicians they portray.

Partridge plays the infamous Sid Vicious, a man who knew the journey from the gutter to the stars (and back again) all too well. It's been a radical left turn for the actor's range – and his hair. After all, he was previously best known for his role as the sensitive, lavishly fringed Viscount Tewkesbury alongside Millie Bobby Brown in Netflix romp *Enola Holmes* – a part that saw his social media following soar to superstar levels.

Although Partridge may put the pretty into 'Pretty Vacant', he also brilliantly captures the little boy lost inside punk's most notorious junkie (and suspected murderer), giving Vicious a depth he was denied by his tabloid demonisation as the scourge of British society at the tail end of the 70s.

"It's very different to *Enola*," Partridge stresses as he Zooms from home in Battersea. "I was worried about getting typecast as the posh, floppy-haired kid – and here's me playing Sid Vicious..."

Partridge's true self, he says, lies "somewhere in between" the two characters. He fell into acting at Alleyn's School in Dulwich, south London, but has no formal drama training. Yet that hasn't stopped him lining up some big parts. As well as returning for *Enola Holmes 2*, he's set to play Peter Pan in *The Lost Girls* alongside Vanessa Redgrave and Joely Richardson, and is attached to *Ferryman*, the hotly anticipated adaptation of the hit young adult novels.

Those will have to wait, however. He may finally be free of Vicious' trademark bogbrush hairdo ("I'm still suffering the effects... I've still got a few straggles left") that he was sporting particularly incongruously at events like Glyndebourne last summer. But, for now, bringing the Notorious S.I.D. to life remains "all I've got on my mind".

"Playing a Sex Pistol!" he marvels. "How cool can it get?"

## How much did you know about the Sex Pistols before you took on the role?

I knew about the cloud of infamy and ill-repute that surrounded them. But other than that, pretty much nothing. I was programmed to associate them with being bad and evil, even though I knew nothing about them, which is something I've enjoyed about playing Sid. Because the same goes for him, but there's so much more to him than he's given credit for.

## Sid was a notorious junkie. Do you have any experience with drugs?

No! I'm a good boy, a very good boy. And I didn't go method! It was interesting playing that having had no experience. It was a lot of acting and hopefully I'm a good enough actor – we'll see.

## Luckily, your director knows a thing or two about portraying heroin use on screen...

Oh, yeah, he knows. There's one shot, I'm in the Chelsea Hotel on the bed and I do that typical 'yawning back' thing. And, when I watched the playback, I did have a 'pinch me' moment, because it looked like it could have been something out of *Trainspotting*. It was so cool. During our two months' prep, Danny got an expert in who was a user for 12 years. We had a fascinating conversation. Some of the stuff he had to say was eye-opening and really helped when playing Sid. Scoring is at the heart of a lot of Sid's motivations and a lot of scenes [involve] watching the decline of this bubbly kid who's full of energy into heroin addiction.

## Sid makes quite a low-key entrance in the series. Was that deliberate?

Yeah. Because he started as just one of Johnny Rotten's mates. You get to see him transform into this figure in a world that's a bit too big for him and he gets everything a bit too quickly. But you also see him as a pretty normal, average kid. And I like the fact that he's got slicked-back hair at the start, rather than the iconic trim.

## It often seemed that 'Sid Vicious' was a character Simon John Ritchie played. How do you deal with that as an actor?

I just tried to understand him. It comes from a place of insecurity. He didn't have the best upbringing, he didn't get much attention, then he's suddenly getting attention for cutting himself, so he's going to chase that. He sees a crowd and acts up to them; he wants to get a reaction because he just wants some attention and love. I feel sorry for him in that respect but, as well as being the innocent Sid, he was also that other Sid at many points of his life.

## He was a divisive character, even within the band...

Yeah, a lot of people have a lot to say about him, and it's often very conflicting. Everyone knows something about Sid. It makes for





## Louis Partridge

**METHOD ACTING** The four actors each learned their character's instrument and rehearsed together as a band for two months

Same with [Vicious' girlfriend] Nancy Spungen; she was 20 when she died. She's been demonised as this horrible archetype of a woman bringing down a band and she was 20 years old – come on!

I found it fascinating, how their relationship worked, what it was fuelled by and how they got themselves into these situations. They were driven by heroin and competition. Emma Appleton, who plays Nancy, is a great actor, and really willing to throw something at you. It was about the most fun I had, working with her.

**Did you watch Gary Oldman's portrayal of Sid in *Sid and Nancy*?**

I looked at it during the audition stage, when I knew virtually nothing about them. And then I decided not to return to it, just because, while there are obvious overlaps, I was playing a different Sid. Gary was 27 when he did that and I was 17 when I got the part, so you do get the sense of his innocence and childishness. But I don't want to be held up against Gary Oldman! **The Pistols had their differences, but they were a real gang. How did you recreate that chemistry?**

Danny was dedicated to making us a band. We rehearsed together for two months. It was during Covid, so we were in a bubble getting to know each other. By the time we came to film it, it was like doing it with your mates.

We all learned our instruments. I learned bass which was good fun – thankfully Sid's bass, not [original Pistols bassist] Glen Matlock's, because I know Glen did a lot more. It was invaluable because, when you're up there playing in front of people, you understand it a bit more.

**Could the four of you do a real gig as the Pistols?**

I reckon we could. We did many gigs, although obviously we had a fake crowd – but they seemed to love it. Occasionally, we would film in locations where people could hear – we recreated the gig on the Thames, so people on

interesting conversations in the back of a taxi. But it's hard playing that, you've got to take a mixture of it all and try and find some common ground. I'm expecting some criticism and I'm happy with that – but I think it's honest and I did my best, so don't come at me.

Above all, for me, it was about how young he was. He was my age when he joined the Sex Pistols, and 21 when he died. So he had about three years of being in the limelight. He didn't know what he was doing, he was in this world he didn't know, getting attention he'd never had before, so I think this shows him in quite a forgiving light. You see him at the start as well as the end, as opposed to just the end, which is how people often see him.

**“I worried about getting typecast — now here's me playing Sid Vicious”**









**YOUNG GUNS** Anson Boon as Johnny Rotten, Partridge as Sid Vicious, Toby Wallace as Steve Jones, and Jacob Slater as Paul Cook recreate a famous Pistols photo

## “You’ve got one shot to play Sid Vicious, you don’t want to muck it up by focusing on a French exam you’re never going to use”

the bridges would look down, thinking ‘What is going on?’ We would hold our own. That’s what Paul [Cook, Sex Pistols drummer] and Glen said, anyway, that we’d be a good tribute act.

**You were doing your A-levels when you filmed *Pistol*. How did you cope with that?**

If it hadn’t been for Covid I’d have had to... Well, I was about to say I’d have had to give up *Pistol*, but I wouldn’t have done that, I’d have had to give up school. Covid meant everything was virtual, so I could blag my way through it. But I didn’t want to jeopardise *Pistol* – you’ve got one shot to play Sid Vicious, you don’t want to muck it up by focusing on a French exam you’re never going to use.

**How did you do?**

I got A\*, A\*, A – and funnily enough the A was in film studies! I thought I knew too much; maybe it’s my teacher having a dig at me. I did well in the A-levels, we’ll find out if I did well in the show in about a month’s time.

**So, you should be off to university...**

That was part of my thinking, or drama school, but I got *Pistol* and there’s *Enola Holmes 2* coming out later this year and a few other jobs lined up, so I thought I’d run with it rather than going to uni and getting drunk for three years. I’m just going to say, “Fuck it”, and try and make it work. Because I really love it, and I seem to be getting lucky so far, so maybe there’s

something there. Having never been to drama school, I haven’t got that sense of security in my ‘craft’. So, the thing I remind myself to know I have a place here is that Danny picked me. Every actor finds ways of putting themselves down, but you can’t really argue with the fact that Danny Boyle picked you!

**Has Millie Bobby Brown given you any tips on handling teenage fame?**

I haven’t really thought about that too much – I probably should have asked her, but I didn’t see it coming. *Enola* was meant to be coming out in cinemas but, because of the pandemic, they put it on Netflix and for some reason that coordinated with the whole TikTok/Instagram thing, so my social media just blew up very quickly. It’s so weird to me – I don’t lean into it too much. I’m not the kind of person to put a photo of my lunch up there and I quite like that.

I’m actually going to hers on the weekend – we’re good mates. She’s busy so we don’t keep in touch too much between jobs, but she makes that set so warm. Going back to *Enola* is awesome, because she’s my age but she’s also so professional and a real, real talent. She teaches me a load.

**Is it part of your plan to become a big Hollywood star?**

I don’t know about that. I haven’t really thought that far ahead, it’s just job to job and hopefully taking the right ones. I’m figuring out what I want to do. To be honest, I just want to work with good people, but also nice people, and Danny is both of those things, times 100.

**The *Ferryman* project could be a big deal, though...**

I’ve got a few ideas but it’s early stages still with that. I’ve got all the books and I’m reading them. For now, I’m just excited about *Pistol*. I would love it to inspire a punk revival and see some Sex Pistols tunes back in the charts – imagine that! It would still shake things up nearly 50 years on. 📀



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# *The man who* **CHANGED** **THE BRITISH** *music scene*

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It was a remarkable story: 15-year-old Londoner Jamal Edwards set up his own media empire to shine a spotlight on emerging music stars. Sadly, in February 2022, the SBTV founder and journalist passed away at the age of 31. His collaborators, friends and employees reflect on his legacy in changing the music industry for Black British talent

***By Nana Baah***







# W

HEN THE NEWS of the untimely death of British music mogul Jamal Edwards was announced on the morning of 21 February, it sent shockwaves through London, the UK music scene and beyond. Tributes from the royal family and billionaires like Richard Branson, as well as music's big names poured in on social media. That evening, hundreds of people flocked to Edwards' mural in Acton, west London, where he grew up. The ground beneath it was covered with bouquets of flowers, condolences written by friends and strangers, and Chelsea FC scarves – Edwards' favourite team. His mother, Brenda Edwards stood in front, singing to honour his life.

Less than four months earlier, in November 2021, after delays caused by Covid and a struggle to find the right place for it, Edwards' mural had been unveiled on Acton High Street. The large-scale portrait of his face was constructed from recycled metal sourced from his local council and created in Bollo Brook Youth Centre, one of four Edwards reopened to give opportunities to young people. It was made from the same stuff Edwards was: Acton and hard work.

His name is one that will be inextricably tied to some of the biggest stars in the British music world and overseas for ever. If you've heard of Dave, or Stormzy or AJ Tracey, that's partly down to him.

At 15, armed with a camera gifted to him by his mum, he began filming his friends and himself under the moniker Smokey Barz. He uploaded those videos onto SBTv, a YouTube channel that would become a media empire. Not only did it make Edwards a multimillionaire, but it led to him dedicating his career to changing the landscape of British music for good.

Edwards started SBTv from his bedroom in 2006, just a year after Form 696 came into effect across 21 London boroughs. A risk-assessment document created by the Metropolitan Police, it led to the closure of events playing predominantly Black music genres – garage, bashment, R&B. Up-and-coming artists were suddenly faced with a huge problem: with nowhere to showcase their talent, there was little to no chance of breaking out into the mainstream.



As an entirely digital platform, SBTv provided the remedy. If you were featured on the platform, with its ever-growing following and the encouragement of Edwards, you were guaranteed to attract attention.

SBTV became the place to catch interviews with established stars, such as Mary J. Blige and Kelly Rowland, as well as those on the threshold of mega-stardom, like Ed Sheeran – who counted Edwards as a close friend – and Rita Ora.

In 2011, a Channel 4 reality TV show *Inside SBTv: From Bedroom to Boardroom* aired about Edwards and his creation. The same year, a popular Google Chrome advert was released, charting the rise of SBTv. It was clear that SBTv was gaining serious momentum: it could no longer be ignored.

**E** EDWARDS' CHARISMA MEANT that people were drawn to him. "What struck me immediately was that there was this young Black guy with a massive smile and a team of young people all from different backgrounds and ethnicities," says Isaac Densu, Edwards' close friend and SBTv's chief creative officer, who was responsible for creating the reality TV show focused on the media empire.

The SBTv team was built on passion and self-belief alone. Nurturing new talent was a particular passion for Edwards.

When Georgia Lewis Anderson's friend sent her Edwards' tweet about looking for an SBTv host, the wannabe presenter quickly applied with a tape she made outside her flat. Days later, she met up with him in north-west London.

"He said he had this platform and that he has



a Kelly Rowland interview tomorrow. So, I'm like, 'I don't believe you. Are you for real?'" says Lewis Anderson. "Obviously, I was gassed and I came the next day after some exams for my second year at uni and Kelly Rowland was there."

After becoming an SBTV presenter, Lewis Anderson got to witness Edwards' knack for securing celebrity interviews first-hand. "Jamal had crazy contacts," she reveals. "Some people approached us wanting to be a part of [SBTV]. If we'd see someone was coming to town, like Rihanna, we would try any way to get her. It didn't always work but that was just Jam, though. It was fun, but it was also a lot of hustle and hard work."

Lily Mercer, DJ, founder of *Viper* magazine and the former online editor at SBTV, believes meeting Jamal shaped her whole career as a music journalist. "Within about two years of working with him, he was asking me to interview Wu Tang, ASAP Rocky, Kendrick Lamar and Mary J. Blige," she says.

"He had a lot of trust in me, very early on in my career. Those were the first interviews I did outside of uni. You don't realise how possible something is until you see someone else do it first-hand. He was a rare character to be able to get that access, but he made me realise that if you're talented, passionate and you have that drive it's not unthinkable to have your own publication or your own media company."

In his 2013 book, *Self Belief: The Vision: How to Take Control on Your Own Terms*, Edwards writes: "Sometimes all it takes is for one person to give you permission to have a go at pursuing your ideas [...] I want to try to be that person for anyone who reads this book."

For some of the UK's favourite musicians, he was indeed that person. One of them, Che Lingo, a British rapper who first met Edwards in 2014 and appeared on SBTV, says his encouragement changed the trajectory of his career. "People had believed in me before," says Lingo. "But Jamal really encouraged me, both publicly and privately and very unapologetically. He put me in a great position to understand how to perform these things I'd written with confidence."

"There are people [in the music industry] who will want to dim your light rather than watch you shine on their platform," Lingo continues. "But Jamal, after hearing people talk about me, he just didn't hesitate to get me in to meet him. He was genuinely impressed by what he saw, and I put numerous videos on his channel, and he never put me in a position

to have to think transactionally about it," he recalls. "I've still got people that will say 'I love all your stuff' and that they found me on SBTV back in the day and that's 10 years ago now. So, he's given me core fans."

As far as motivational speakers go, Edwards stood out. There was no social media presence chock-full of recycled quotes. His feeds remain a point of support and celebration for his mum and his friends in the industry, and Edwards' hands-on approach leaves ripples in all avenues of the music industry to this day.

Part of his legacy, many believe, is in bringing about cultural change and helping to push open the doors for Black people.

"If a young Black man in a tracksuit goes into a place of business, no one's really going to blink any more," says Mercer. "I personally think it was Jamal who led that change."

Lewis Anderson shares an anecdote about going with

Edwards to interview Flo Rida at a popular London nightclub. Edwards was refused entry but she, his white employee, was allowed in. "It was shocking how much wasn't led by Black figureheads at the time. Even looking at how Richard Branson and Prince Charles paid tribute to Jamal, we wouldn't really hear people like that give respect to young Black men. We're seeing the power of Black music being in Black people's hands."

Densu, who left a job as a commissioner at one of the UK's biggest TV channels to work at SBTV, agrees. "It's down to a combination of technology and visionaries like Jamal that over the past decade gatekeepers have lost their control over the culture," he says. "There's a new generation of opportunities transforming the way we tell our stories on our own terms. The thing that excites me the most is that now a lot of these companies are building the infrastructure to employ people from our community without it being tokenistic."

"He's definitely one of the founding fathers of Black UK media because the scene changed when he started to grow," says Lingo. "There are a lot of platforms that wouldn't exist without Jamal and SBTV. It's just facts. You didn't really see Black faces in vlogs before so it was intimate and kind of personal because when somebody went on there, you were excited because you knew you were watching somebody that could be massive in future. He really knew how to pick those gems."

For all the waves he caused in the music



industry, Edwards wanted to bring about change.

"Every Christmas, he would go to a homeless shelter," says Densu. Although usually understated, the charity work he did in Acton turned lives around.

"He was a force of nature," says Dr Rupa Huq, MP for Ealing Central and Acton. He first met Edwards when he came to one of his surgeries, brimming with ideas about the youth-work charity he was setting up. In the years that followed, they attended council functions together, such as the opening of a youth centre or switching on the Christmas lights.

"He was never bombastic, showy or self-aggrandising," explains Huq. "In the days following Jamal's death, charities I work with – Acton Homeless Concern, Ealing Soup Kitchen, Ealing Wildlife – [were] mourning his passing and praising him for helping out behind the scenes there."

Matt Small, the artist behind the mural, met Edwards beforehand. "At first, he was like, 'Oh no, a picture of me' and he was a bit embarrassed in that humble way he had," says Small. "But Jamal was quite enthusiastic about it when he realised it's about what he represents. He's a guy who got fame and respect because of what he has done, which is really a benefit to our culture and society. He represents going above and beyond for the greater good."

His mural is a reminder of Edwards' success and vision, something that continues to inspire his friends and co-workers after his death.

"One of the things that's really struck me since he's passed is that there are good people in the world, but everyone has their own capitalist dream. But Jamal, a man with the world at his feet, didn't subscribe to that," says Densu. "Certain decisions would mean that we would make a lot of money, but Jamal would think about the cost: is it going to cause unhappiness? That was his main thing. His legacy is pure. He was definitely a businessman and an entrepreneur, but in the same breath, he was a humanitarian." ®



 ISSEY  
GLADSTON

# WORKING CLASS ACT

Ione Gamble's new essay collection, *Poor Little Sick Girls*, dissects chronic illness, feminism, wealth and social media with a uniquely personal lens. In this extract, the founder and editor of *Polyester* zine explains why the taste hierarchy in arts, fashion and culture exists not to liberate us but for the middle and upper classes to assert their dominance









# I HAVE ALWAYS

CONSIDERED OUR SENSE OF TASTE to be a primal instinct rather than an intellectual tool. Not taste in terms of the food we eat, but every other thing we inevitably choose to consume in our day-to-day lives. Most of the time, the reason we like the things we like seems predetermined by an unexplained force or part of our brain that is impossible to decode. It feels innate and emotional to be drawn to a particular object or piece of music, just as it feels immovable when we feel repulsed. Our sense of self is constantly evolving but ultimately stationary; we are drawn to the things that excite us for reasons that cannot be explained by logic or reason. But at some point, we learn to not fully trust our own taste. We accept that there are people who have better taste than us, and seek out those who can teach us how to fill our lives with the right kind of things.

It can be enjoyable to either challenge or conform to what is overwhelmingly accepted as good, or tasteful, or worthy of our headspace and money. It can be fun to lust over a specific bag or pair of shoes, just as we relish the opportunity to subvert popular trends in an attempt to create our own. But letting our taste be determined and judged by others – even when that means rejecting what is universally accepted as ‘good’ – also holds us back. The modern hierarchy of taste is not, as I once thought, a series of tools to be utilised in the quest for self-expression. Instead, it is a prescribed set of rules built on generations of class disparity.

The people who invent the rules of taste are the same people who have gripped onto power for the whole of modern history. They use taste not to liberate us, or to make life enjoyable, but to assert their dominance over anyone not lucky enough to be born into bundles of cash. I came to learn that having ‘good taste’ is not dependent on how confident you are in yourself and your interests, but on how closely you can resemble the rich.

It wasn’t until adulthood that I realised my family was poor. My revelation didn’t come in one single moment, but rather a bombardment of seemingly minor events that finally helped me put together the pieces and conclude that the people around me lived completely different lives to mine. The countless times my peers have suggested I just ask my mum for money to fund private healthcare for my

Crohn’s disease, as if this was a totally normal, cheap and reasonable request, probably contributed to my realisation. Or when I’ve arrived to parties dressed up to the nines for fear of someone calling me out for not looking rich enough, only to have someone in my group declare it a ‘flex’ to look like shit when walking through expensive venues.

It might have been after hearing for the umpteenth time how someone launched a fledgling business financed by their trust fund, or watching friends’ Christmases on Instagram and discovering their sprawling country estates, their designer gifts and their swimming pools. Until I moved away from home, rich people were an abstract concept in my mind. They existed only on TV screens, or in the pages of my hoarded magazines. I would pore

over shoplifted high-fashion publications in awe of the clothes and speechless at the price tags, spend countless hours watching series after series about privileged teens, and meticulously plot how to recreate my favourite high-fashion looks on a budget. I didn’t spend much time feeling sorry for myself because my life wasn’t the same as those of the people I admired – why would it be?

Who actually had a job or a rich enough family that saw them ferried around the major global city of their choice, buying whatever clothes they wanted and constantly attending events with open bars? It seemed impossibly glamorous to me, a teenager who spent her Friday nights drinking two-litre bottles of cider on the beach and shopping in Primark. It was always fairly obvious that my household didn’t







have as much disposable income as some of those I grew up with – I didn't go on the same holidays, dress in outfits from the same shops, or have the same cultural references drilled into me from childhood. But my mum's lack of income didn't cause me to miss out on anything or prevent me from discovering the things I loved. OK, I wasn't buying Prada or drinking champagne stolen from my parents' drinks cabinet, but I found ways to get my hands on nearly everything I wanted, within reason.

I created workarounds for things I couldn't afford, and saved for things that were impossible to talk my way into. I was convinced that money was not the only way to get what I wanted, nor the only way to garner respect. I never had much, but I was always sure of who I was and what I liked. Above all, I was absolutely sure that I had good taste – despite the fact that I often didn't have the means to prove it. But when I moved to London, I inadvertently became one of the people I'd convinced myself were nothing more than fantasy – though without the connections, cash or confidence that ensured I would make it in the cut-throat world of fashion.

I didn't go to private school, had not a single family member who followed a remotely similar path to mine, and would have never even heard of a trust fund if it wasn't for *Gossip Girl* or *The Hills*. Though I grew up in a single-parent household, with a mum who relied on child tax credits and free school meals, by entering the magazine and publishing industry, I was always assumed to have come from money. As I stared at the people filling up the spaces I found myself in, I realised that they were nothing like the ones I grew up with. I was almost totally

unaware that I was pining for acceptance in an industry that continues to only welcome the rich while being utterly obsessed with those who are poor.

My confusion at ending up in rooms full of birthright millionaires most likely came from a mistaken belief that taste was innate rather than learnt. Growing up, I was encouraged to explore my sense of taste: to dye my hair garish colours that I would come to regret, to buy clothes that were the opposite of what everyone else around me was wearing, and to honestly be myself no matter the cost. I came to believe that taste was not a singular vision, but multiple splintering threads, and that even if you didn't fit in with the majority of people, you'd eventually find a place filled with those whose taste matched yours. I didn't believe in the moral superiority of liking the right things; I didn't really understand or have any knowledge of the class system, and I thought that actively pushing against the things that everybody else liked was the most exciting thing in the world.

But in London, instead of finding people who embraced the subjectivity and complexity of taste in the way I understood it, I realised that most people who gravitated towards the creative industries I aspired to be a part of did so as a way to uphold a code of taste that keeps people out, rather than welcoming them in. That the people who decide what we wear, watch, listen to and put in our homes are not

there necessarily for love of those things, but because it is all they have ever known. Their 'good' taste isn't acquired through years of experiences that helped them develop a sense of who they are, but is rather passed down to them from family members who have always had access to the finer things in life.

In the original incarnation of *Gossip Girl*, Blair self-identifies as 'a dictator of taste'. She's judgemental, particular and knows everything there is to know about clothes. Her mother is a fashion designer, she lives in a penthouse and is impossibly privileged. She is also a fictional character, and one I could have never imagined encountering in real life. I saw a lot of myself in Blair: her strong will, her bossiness, and her obsession with how what we wear is socially and politically important. Our similarities aside from fashion ideologies were non-existent; our upbringings couldn't have been further apart. What I failed to realise on my copious re-watches of the series was that Blair's title was fitting because of her background and not because of her passions. And that in my adult life, I would meet more 'dictators of taste' than I ever thought possible.

**M**UCH OF THE time, an obsession with 'bad taste' is only accepted when rich people indulge in the enjoyment of low aesthetics in a heavily dosed display of irony. A love of all things OTT has to be laced with a knowing sense that these things are not really being taken seriously.

Traditional signifiers of wealth – jewels, gold, Versace-print everything, logo-adorned designer handbags and expensive cars – were co-opted by celebrity culture at some point in the early 2000s in a very American style of aspiration. All the things that told us somebody was rich became very, very trashy.

From Paris Hilton to the Kardashian family, being open about how much money

you had started to be seen as cheap. As the aforementioned starlets became embroiled in sex-tape scandals and rose to public infamy when they chose to open up their lives to us common people through our TV screens, the

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MONEY"**



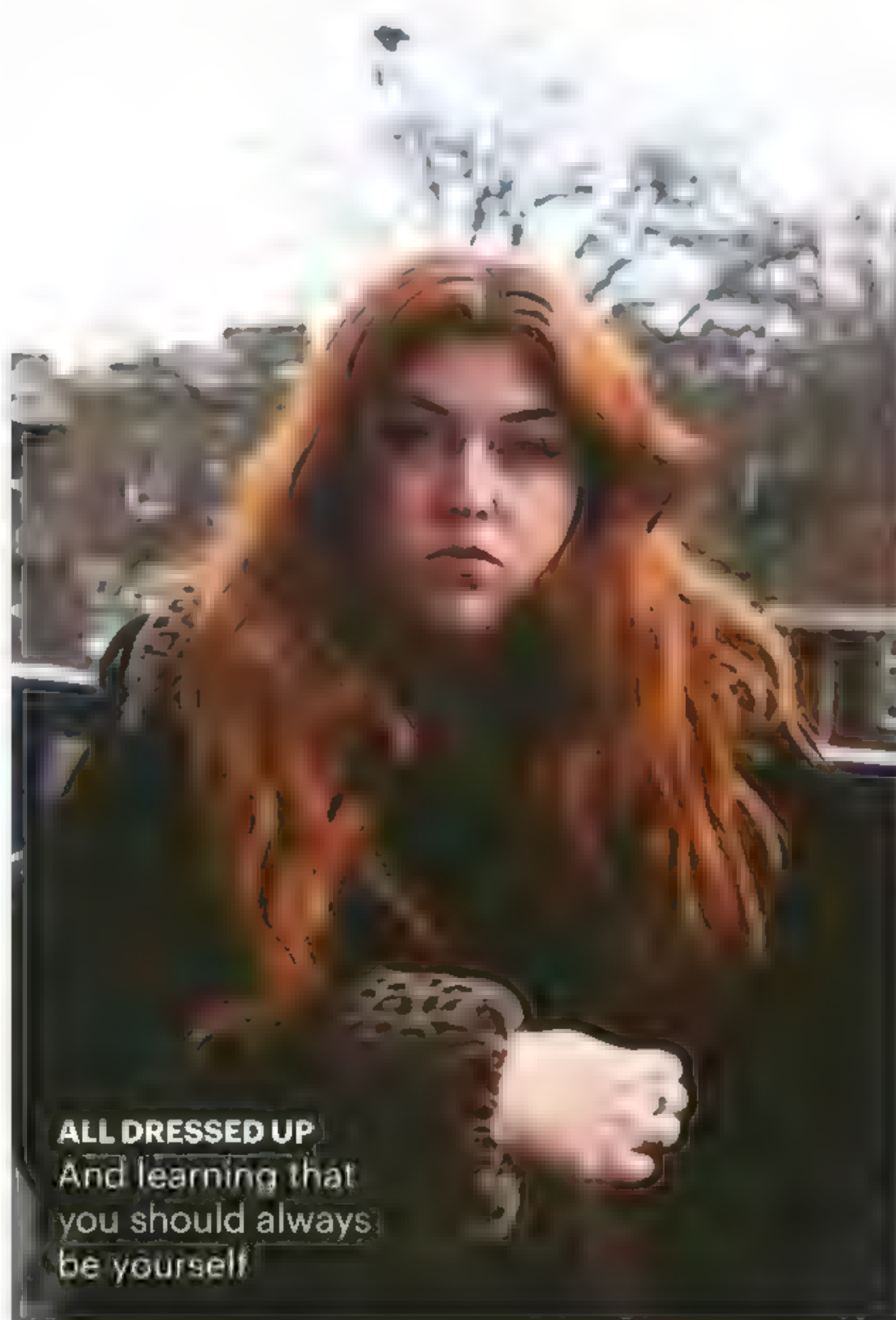
wealthy had to find a new way to assert their dominance over the rest of us. Cold marble surfaces and the inclination to have literally nothing on display in any part of your home replaced a penchant for houses stuffed full of expensive artefacts. Pink, denim and diamanté clothing was eclipsed by plain beige silhouettes that signalled to the world that you could afford to spend £5,000 on a coat that could have just as easily cost £50.

These shifts in what we consider to be good taste also align with a move towards conservatism in the world. Wearing a Phoebe Philo-era Celine suit may offer the illusion of an empowered woman but, in reality, we're mimicking stereotypical masculinity and reasserting that good taste is only viable when it upholds the cis-patriarchal status quo. But as the upper classes continue their obsession with minimalism, our sense of taste has become muddled, as we all become increasingly preoccupied with authenticity.

Authenticity is, rightly or wrongly, no longer considered possible when you're rolling in cash and people are becoming more acutely aware of the prevalence of nepotism and wealth when it comes to who we consider taste-makers. Whereas existing in the upper and middle classes used to be an immediate signifier that you knew all about the finer things in life, those who do come from money are going to greater and greater lengths to conceal their realities in order to prove they have earned their position of power rather than inherited it.

My once proud confidence in my own taste is chipped away at each time I am put in a room full of people in designer dresses with perfectly blow-dried hair. I'll forget every impressive thing I've ever done, and how good I felt I looked before I left the house. I'll feel unkempt no matter how put together I am, and inadequate no matter how much I know, deep down, that I deserve to be there.

In those moments, it feels impossible for good taste to transcend class when you're attempting to be taken seriously. But at the opposite end of the spectrum, there is a whole host of fairly wealthy people who are desperate



to conceal that they are surrounded by money. People who are eager to convince those around them of their working-class credentials, despite the fact that their parents supplement their income and paid their deposit when they bought a property. As I found myself speaking to more and more people from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, I realised that they don't see being poor as a rigid socioeconomic standard dictated by your income and quality of life.

Instead, to many people, being 'poor' exists on an imaginary spectrum that genuinely hard-up people never have the pleasure to even consider. For some of them, it means not being able to afford dinner out multiple times a week, missing out on one of their four holidays abroad, or dipping into the savings accounts their parents set up for them. While growing up poor is actually debilitating in terms of opportunities and experiences, those who are rich have become ashamed to admit that their wealth may have helped them.

Instead, they decide to either keep quiet about their background or warp their origin story to align with working-class experiences. Influential people struggle to accept that they are rich, and spend their time fetishising the experiences of those who aren't. At the opposite end of the conversation, those who are poor or who grew up without abundance

are left feeling gaslighted by the people they see wearing head-to-toe designer, living in their own flats and buying expensive furniture while in the same breath bragging about their latest claim to have no disposable cash left at the end of each month.

UNTIL THE FIFTIES and sixties, trickle-down theory prevailed: working-class people were considered too culturally lacking to pioneer or create, and the upper classes dictated fashion trends and beauty norms, which then worked their way down into the mainstream. This is similar to how the high street operates now: we see the Miu Miu runway, and six months later, similar items start popping up in H&M. However, beginning halfway through the twentieth century, and continuing right up to the present day, trickle-up theory is thought to be more culturally relevant in contemporary arts and culture. It refers to trends originating in working-class or marginalised cultures that then penetrate class barriers and are adopted by those in the upper echelons of society. Denim becoming socially acceptable in the sixties, the grunge movement of the nineties, and even T-shirts transforming from military wear to everyday essentials are all examples of this.

Trickle-up theory can be observed in practically every cultural movement and trend we see today, whether it's a fickle obsession with diversity, streetwear, or the thousands of micro-trends we see across our Instagram Explore pages on a regular basis. For a long time, I considered trickle-up to be a win for progression. I understood it as a way for marginalised people to have their contributions recognised. But the longer I spent observing these trends, the more I understood trickle-up culture as another way to exploit people who innovate but do not have the resources to capitalise on their own ideas.

No matter how genuinely interesting or original a piece of clothing, music, art or writing is, your success is capped – both monetarily and in terms of reach – unless someone further up the social food chain can profit from it. Part of the reason why this problem still prevails is that we are obsessed with acceptance; people who have been left on the outside naturally crave to be let in, and it's difficult to trust in the power of our

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own ideas when they have been diminished for so long.


Separately, trickle-up theory has been mutating since the advent of the internet. Now, it's easier than ever to access alternative ideas – and it's also far easier to get away with packaging yourself as subversive when you aren't, as social media seemingly flattens social divides and places us all on the same platform. Where we apply trickle-up theory, we are, more often than not, actually referring to a fetishisation of youth culture, regardless of social class. We look to teenagers and young adults to dictate trends and taste on a micro-level online, taking them at face value. Influencers and cultural pioneers are often guilty of presenting as poor online, in a bid to be relatable to their audiences, when in actuality their lives more closely resemble royalty than roughing it.

Trying to cosplay as someone who had money always had me feeling as though I was running to catch up with those around me; it was exhausting, unfulfilling and futile. At a time in my life at which I felt most vulnerable – sick, surrounded by people I couldn't relate to, and living away from my family – I decided to embrace what I had always loved, rather than constantly trying to climb upwards and away from my true interests and beliefs. I've never enjoyed the idea of having less stuff. By unashamedly embracing the things I had previously felt embarrassed at finding joy in,

I live a happier life. My floor is covered in a sprawling zebra-print rug, next to a plush pink velvet headboard that frames multiple prints and works of art that bring me peace when I feel most cut off from the world. Through my zine, I found other people who felt the same way as me and had grown up under similar circumstances. I learnt that my interest in the bright, the garish, the girly and the gruesome wasn't devoid of merit, thought or feeling.

Using the pope of trash himself, John Waters, as my guide, I became confident in my belief that trying to appeal to everyone – or even those in closest proximity to you – isn't as important as finding people who truly understand why seemingly meaningless objects, aesthetics, films, bands or clothes can help build the emotional basis of who you are. Most importantly,

I began to understand that our concept of what is good and what is bad was created by people I have absolutely no interest in trying to impress.

The taste hierarchy is nothing more than a well-crafted lie, maintained to help the same narrow group of people cling on to power with their cold dead hands. By smashing it to pieces, a brighter world full of gloriously garish taste is possible. 

**PRE-ORDER POOR LITTLE SICK GIRLS BY IONE GAMBLE NOW. AVAILABLE FROM DIALOGUE BOOKS FROM 26 MAY 2022**

## “SOCIAL MEDIA SEEMINGLY FLATTENS SOCIAL DIVIDES”

## Ione Gamble's 5 best UK Zines

Print is no longer an elitist, expensive medium. With easy access printing services and open-source software allowing practically anyone with an internet connection to start their own publication, the zine scene hasn't thrived like this in decades. Below are a few of my favourites.

### ASHAMED

*Ashamed* is a zine founded in 2019 by Polyester Podcast co-host and community editor, Halima Jibril. A publication by and for people of colour only, *Ashamed* uses its print and digital platforms to “make art directly confronting the feeling of shame, and our mission is to reclaim it”.

### THE FAT ZINE

*The Fat Zine* is a submission-based print publication by Polyester's very own deputy editor, Gina Tonic. Despite a move towards ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusivity’ in media spaces, fat people are woefully still left out of the equation. *The Fat Zine* exists in complete opposition to the backwards beauty standards that have plagued our culture for decades, allowing fat creatives to tell their own stories and portray their own narratives.

### SHY BAIRNS GET NOWT

*Shy Bairns Get Nowt* is the collaborative practice of northern-based artists Izzy Kroese, Erin Blamire, Eleanor Haswell and George Gibson. The collective is interested in ideas of identity, community, popular culture, and interactivity, with projects ranging from exhibitions about fan culture to contemplating artist development within collectives.

### BAD FORM

Spotlighting authors of colour, *Bad Form* review aims to address the race representation gap in publishing, focusing on different themes such as sex, beauty, and food. In their own words, “the world of literary reviews is a pale and stale place, and we're here to fuck it up with a lot of colour.” Containing reviews, features and interviews, one issue of *Bad Form* will leave you with a reading list long enough to see you through the rest of 2022.

### HATE

*Hate* epitomises DIY spirit and independence. Completely free of ads, the publication explores politics and social justice through creative mediums. With contributors including Martin Parr and themes such as death, sex and the environment, *Hate* has been a London zine scene staple since its inception in 2015. Their Instagram, which has been deleted multiple times by the platform, also contains some of the best political meme curation in the online realm.







# RHYME AND REASON

A life marked by deprivation and a spell in prison have shaped rapper Potter Payper into the creative powerhouse he is today

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**BY EMMANUEL ONAPA**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANCISCO GOMEZ DE VILLABOA



In September 2020, Potter Payper made his long-awaited return to the music scene with the acclaimed *Training Day 3* mixtape. Marking the final entry in that series, it hit the charts at No. 3, as fans latched onto his authentic lyricism and catchy wordplay.

This achievement by the east London MC seems all the more remarkable when you learn that he had been released from prison just months before. Potter served half of a four-year sentence for his role in running a county lines drug-smuggling operation.

Further success came with his follow-up mixtape *Thanks for Waiting*, which dropped in October 2021. Potter's first project featuring other artists, it debuted at No. 8 on the UK Official Album Chart – his second top 10 entry in just over a year.

At 31, his career continues to flourish. His recent single 'Gangsteritus' – capturing the emotional moment his late and beloved grandmother kissed him as he awaited sentencing – recently featured in the hit Netflix series *Top Boy*.

Although his time behind bars has undoubtedly influenced his work, the rapper's storytelling of street politics and the detailed accounts of personal experiences in his music are impossible to mimic. It's this ability to melodically paint vividly clear images with his words that sets Potter apart from his rap peers.

"A lot of people that rap in general terms don't know how to make you feel it," Potter states. "I found a way to be able to make you see it with my words because

I see it myself."

This gift in evoking emotion, he says, is rooted in a desire to platform his experience by "giving myself a voice".

"Coming from where I'm from, I was a small little fat white boy and didn't have a voice in the hood," he explains.

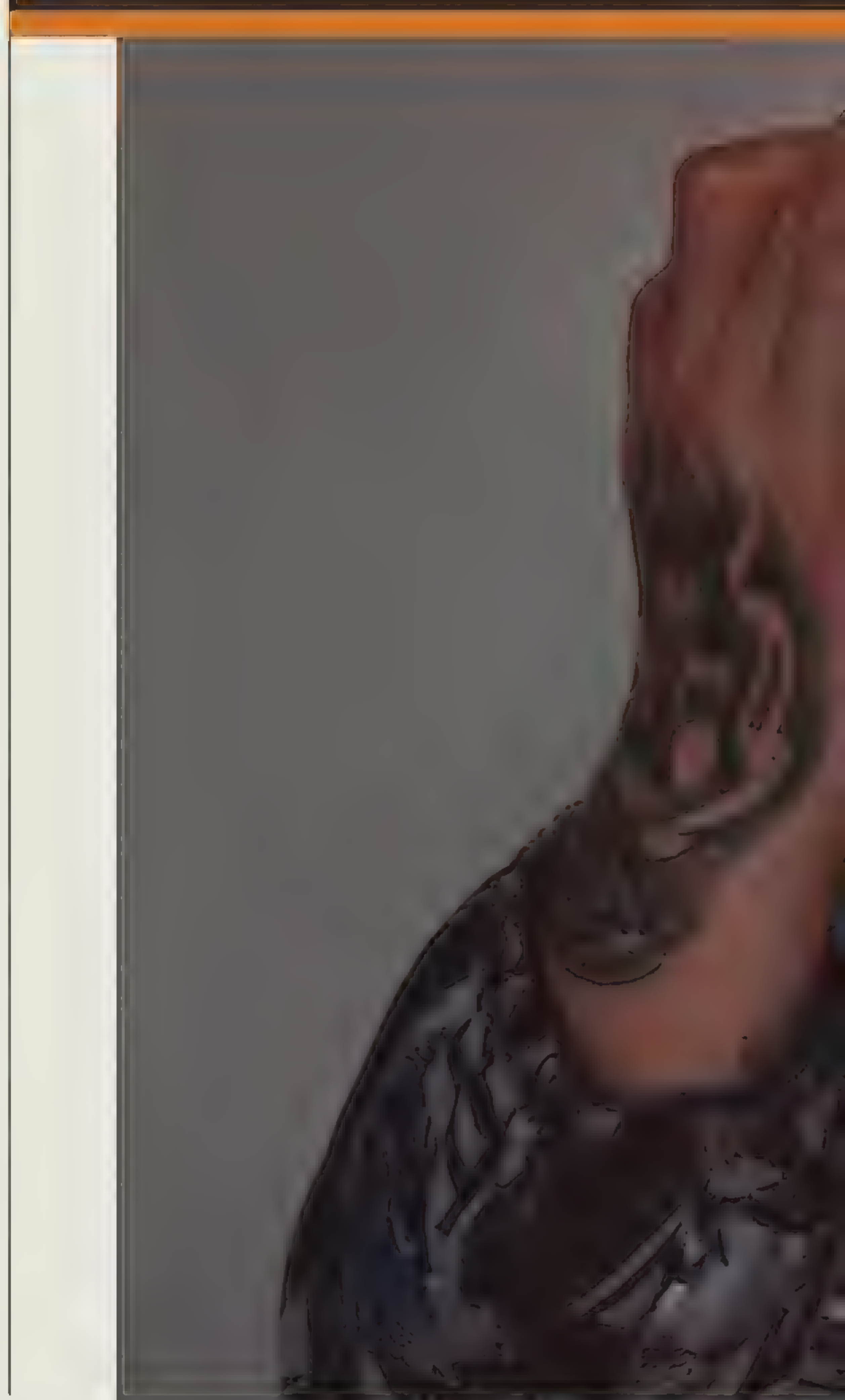
The sincere yet elegiac talent that comes through in all of his songs is evidently a product of his personality today. On arrival at his photoshoot in a studio in Walthamstow, east London, Potter's contagious, energetic banter rubs off on us all. While he is being snapped, he playfully rubs his feet in circles on the ground, creating sounds that spark laughter from everyone in the room.

Acknowledging that the way in which fans consume music is changing rapidly, with many rappers focusing on TikTok to top the charts, Potter is ready to adapt – so long as the substance of his music can stay the same.

"You have to grow with the times," he says. "As an artist I don't want to be outdated. But it doesn't mean I compromise my sound and me as a person – my music is deeper than that."

Despite his youthful and playful spirit, he finds his poetic craft so vital to his career that he continues to use conventional methods when in creative mode. "I still write a lot of my stuff with pen and paper," he says. "I have a lyric book and I still stick to that process because that's how I've always written."

Reflecting on his peers and the state of the rap industry, he adds: "You can't compare me to certain rappers if you know about my catalogue and the work that I've put in. I signed to a label last year but for the past 12 years, I've been funding my career by myself."





**"YOU HAVE TO GROW WITH THE TIMES. AS AN ARTIST I DON'T WANT TO BE OUTDATED. BUT IT DOESN'T MEAN I COMPROMISE MY SOUND AND ME AS A PERSON"**



Despite this, he expresses gratitude to the tight-knit music industry that showed him love and support. "I built relationships with people before I went away," he says. "I'm really cool with genuine people who, if it wasn't for the music industry, would be doing something else which would destroy their lives and you've got to commend them for that."

Themes in Potter's music often reach back into his past. "I'm just in a time machine in my music and I evoke those emotions, their feelings, their experiences and I use them to drive me and drive my music."

His fans are also, he shares, "a constant reminder not to lose myself and stay humble". "I started doing this for no money with the idea of making no money – but you grow. I've been doing this for more than 10 years now. You would be silly to think I have not changed as a person."

Over time, Potter has come to terms with how much weight and influence artists from the hood have, leading him to be more conscious of the content of his material. "I've got more of a responsibility for the things that I put out in the public domain, you know what I'm saying."

"People are listening to me for hope, inspiration. People are listening to me for motivation. People are listening to me to relate to someone that maintains that image, unlike your average artist, even if they start with it."

However, he isn't taking anything for granted just yet – he says growing up on a tough estate in Dagenham has enabled him to live in the moment.

"You can't miss it if you never had it or [had] never seen it before. I didn't know that there was anything more than that until I saw it and then on and on and on







and your mind and horizon expand until you realise, ‘Wow, how did I live in that place of darkness?’”

Yet his experience of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion has informed Potter how dysfunctional our current system is. He knows that the severe cracks in the welfare system and the failures of the criminal justice system to rehabilitate citizens leave young people growing up without hope.

“Once your liberty is taken you lose yourself,” Potter confesses. “The first time I was taken away from my family and sent to prison in my youth, I don’t know what at that point made me think that when I come out, I can break the law again and again.

“There was something that outweighed that and I felt hopelessness. Remember, we are in England. Everything should be provided for you by the state. How can a child feel hopeless? And I was a child back then. Remember, poverty breeds crime and, before you know it, you’ve alienated a whole group of society.”

When Potter was growing up, he started to see the urban deterioration of his community in Barking. Now the place where he was raised has drastically changed. Gentrification has swept through working-class areas in a process that saw his mother forced to move.

“They knocked down the estate that I grew up on,” he reveals. “I grew up there and have memories there and people’s families lived there. The living conditions were inhumane and if they were to fix them and let them live at a decent standard, that could have worked. But they didn’t; they just moved my mum to another estate.”

There’s no doubt that a career as prosperous as his comes with its fair share

of knowledge, wisdom and experience. Potter’s advice to aspiring artists is: “Whatever the people love you for, love yourself for it. Don’t just be trying to switch with the times and jump on every new trend,” he says. “If you’ve been yourself, then stay who you are.”

You sense that this artist still has so much more to give. He exclusively tells Rolling Stone UK that his long-awaited debut album is finally due for release later this year.

“I’m making my first album and I would say I’m well on the way,” he says. “I’ve

finished about 30 per cent of it – I’ve got, like, 15 to 16 songs completed.”

And it is music, he says, that has ultimately allowed him to find harmony.

“When I was growing up, I couldn’t look my nan in her eyes and see how she knew I was lying or doing the wrong thing. But just before she died, I could look her in her eyes and that’s how I knew I was on the correct path,” he says. “I have three sisters that were being looked after by my nan – but now I can look after them. As long as I continue doing this, that lets me be at peace.” ®





# BELLA POARCH VS. THE WORLD

From a painful childhood to military service to global pop stardom, the TikTok sensation keeps defying the odds

BY BRITTANY SPANOS

ILLUSTRATION BY EMAN CASALLOS

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ELLA POARCH had a panic attack this morning. While pulling her glossy black hair into a high ponytail and doing

her makeup for a 9am appointment, the nerves hit. She wasn't so sure she wanted to leave her home on the east side of Los Angeles, where she lives with her cat, PeePee, and French bulldog, PooPoo. Actually, she was sure she didn't. Yet here she is, sitting across the couch from me at a studio in Culver City, the 25-year-old Navy veteran turned mega-viral creator – her bouncy lip-sync to a line from Millie B's 'M to the B (Soph Aspin Send)' from August 2020 is still the most popular TikTok of all time, with more than 56 million likes – turned budding pop star. While Poarch is a goth,

combat-ready sexpot on her social pages and in music videos, in person she's shy. Her discomfort with her newfound fame is palpable. Still, as she has throughout her life, she pushed through the anxiety and the fear – "I was like, 'I got this,'" she says – to arrive right where she needed to be.

The transition from nobody to celebrity may be weirder for social media stars than anyone. One day you're playing ukulele to your phone camera alone in your bedroom (as Poarch used to do), the next you have millions of followers (in Poarch's case, 88.8 million to date). Still,

creating is often a solitary business, one that doesn't require collaborators or autograph signings with screeching fans. It's only those who break as big as Poarch has over the past two years that find themselves suddenly thrust into a world of IRL interactions with strangers.

"It's overwhelming when I meet new people," Poarch says, her girlish voice underscoring her shyness. "That's really what I struggle with right now."

She was just as timid when she first met her producer Sub Urban, a fellow Warner Records artist who'd blown up

on TikTok. Though she says she "didn't talk at all" during that first session, Poarch worked through those nerves, too. Together, the pair made 'Build a Bitch', her spooky-pop first single that would chart globally and top off at Number 56 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. In the 24 hours following its debut last May, it was the most-watched music video on YouTube, with 10 million views.

The success of 'Build a Bitch' surprised many who'd seen Poarch merely as the cute lip-sync girl: it was confident, funny, dark, and weird. The video had blockbuster-movie-





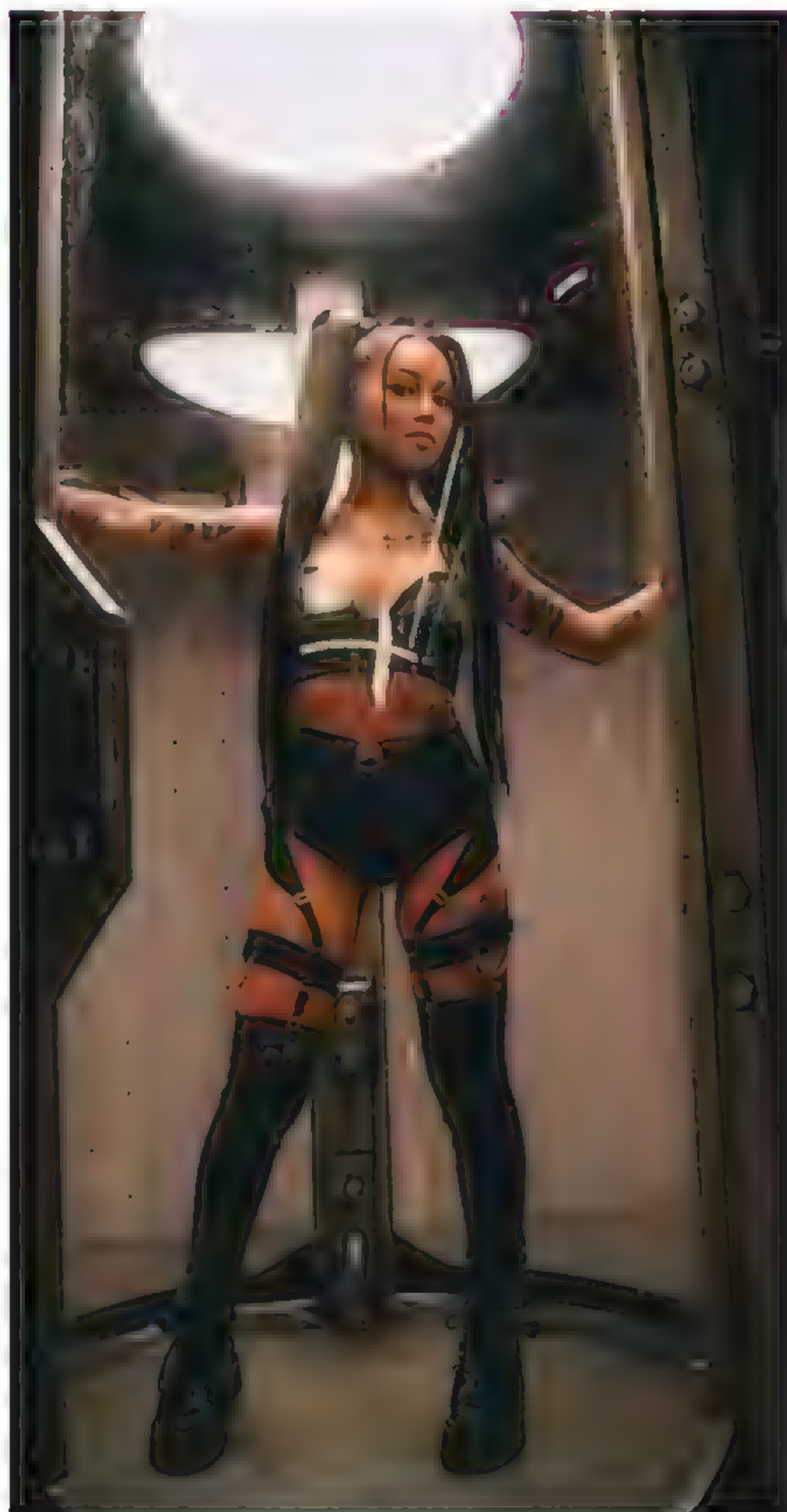


quality effects and featured cameos from content creators Bretman Rock and Mia Khalifa. But for every new fan Poarch won over, there were sceptics who didn't think she could be a real artist.

"Why are you making music? You only make faces," she says of the negative comments she saw online. "They were just hating because [of me] becoming famous on social media, then wanting to make music."

It hasn't deterred her: Poarch has been hard at work on her debut EP, due out this year, which will feature songs with Sub Urban as well as her new friend Grimes, who calls the TikTok "super-hardcore." In a life that's taken her from a painful childhood to the military to global stardom, it's just another example of Poarch overcoming steep odds and upending every expectation.

**T**IKTOK IS full of theatre kids, wannabe dancers, and oversharers, but when Poarch started creating on the app in the Covid summer of 2020, her content didn't fit any of those categories. In fact, it was confoundingly simple. Making heavy use of TikTok's Face Zoom feature, she created minimalist lip-sync videos full of cutesy, cartoonish facial expressions borrowed from video games and anime. (See the signature cross-eyed smirk that punctuates that 'M to the B' hit.) She found comfort in embracing a character,



Poarch (at an L.A. museum gala in 2021), who taught herself to play pop songs like Coldplay's 'Paradise' on the piano by ear, parlayed her meteoric TikTok fame into a music career, to the surprise of industry executives who'd dismissed her in early meetings. "They didn't really understand that I'm passionate with music," she says

something she'd learned to do as a form of escape throughout her life.

Born in the Philippines, Poarch was raised by her grandmother until she was three years old, when she was adopted by a white American veteran and his Filipino wife. She gained two sisters and a brother, all adopted too.

As she spoke about on the podcast *H3* last year, when Bella was seven, life on their family farm grew troubling. Poarch's father was tough on her and her brother, the youngest members of the family. They had to wake up at three or four in the morning to do chores, like cleaning up animal waste – a task her sisters were spared. Often, she said, they wouldn't be allowed to shower before school, leading classmates to bully them. If her work on the farm wasn't up to her father's standards, she alleged, he would deny her meals and sometimes hit her. Meanwhile, she claimed, her mother stayed silent.

At school, Poarch found a way to express herself. While hiding it from her parents, she joined talent shows every month. And every month, she won. "I actually have 36 golden medals," she says proudly. Each of those wins came from a performance of Beyoncé's 'Listen', a

song written for the film *Dreamgirls*, where the character Deena exerts independence from her controlling husband. It's still Poarch's karaoke go-to.

When she was 13, Poarch, her brother, and her parents all moved to the United States, eventually settling in Fresno, California (her sisters stayed in the Philippines). While she's said her father's physical abuse subsided there, at 17, Poarch got away

from him for good: she enrolled in the Navy, like her brother had done a few years prior. Oddly enough, she found freedom in Virginia, where she attended basic training.

There was

discipline and structure, but also days off where she could do fun things she'd been denied at home, like go to the mall and play around with makeup. "It changed a lot for me," she says. "I explored more about myself."

While in aviation school in Pensacola, Florida, Poarch got her first tattoo, a small heart. She's now covered in pieces, many of which she says have helped cover up the literal scars left behind from her childhood. But her favourite is a pair of wings that wrap around her back, with a ship in

**"EVEN IF YOU'RE THE SMALLEST PERSON, YOU CAN DO WHATEVER YOU WANT"**



the middle, a tribute to her time as an aviation ordnance specialist.

"I was the smallest person in my workplace," Poarch says. "My job [was] picking up 80-pound, big machine guns and taking them to helicopters and doing maintenance on them. They would make fun of me: 'Oh, you're so tiny.' But it helped me push myself. It taught me that even if you're the smallest person, you can do whatever you want. You can get through a lot."

**P**OST-DEPLOYMENT, Poarch settled down in Hawaii. In early 2020, she logged onto TikTok for the first time. By the time her 'M to the B' video took off a few months later, Poarch had already signed with a management company that had been searching for promising nonwhite content creators. Poarch relocated to Los Angeles while in the throes of viral fame, and told her team she wanted to pursue music. At meetings with labels, many laughed in their faces, one of her managers, Aryan Mahyar, says. That is, until she showed them videos of her covering the low-fi artist Shiloh Dynasty on her ukulele. "That's what made them believe me," she says.

Once 'Build a Bitch' was ready for the world, however, Poarch faced a new battle: she was just another creator trying to cross over with music, alongside names like Dixie D'Amelio, Addison Rae, and Bryce Hall — all of



whom were struggling to find audiences outside of the app. "Everyone was hammering home that TikTokers had no talent," Mahyar says. But, true to form, Poarch was up for the challenge. "I think that encouraged Bella. She felt like it was an opportunity."

Two new songs she lets me hear prove she's taken that opportunity and run with it. They're Melanie Martinez-inspired, haunted doll-core, full of eerie tinkering noises that add an edge to her sweet, soft vocals. She describes

her new music as "dark pop" in its sound, while the lyrics are meant to inspire people to fight for themselves. All of it stems from her own journey to self-love and acceptance.

"Looking at Beyoncé, she sang songs to uplift other people," Poarch

says. "Now, that's what I want to do."

Her friend Grimes says Poarch's sound makes sense: "[Bella] is calm in the face of chaos. Despite going through some deeply fucked-up stuff, she's hyperfocused on optimism and making sure everyone wins."

The day after we meet, Poarch will jet off to Austin for Grimes' birthday bash. But mostly, pop's shyest new star finds comfort in singing, writing, and meditating at home. On weekends, her brother, now 28, comes up from San Diego, where he's still in the Navy. And she's rebuilt a relationship with her sisters, both of whom live in the Philippines and are in their early thirties. "We were young. I don't really blame them," Poarch says now.

As for her adoptive parents, Poarch last spoke to them a few years ago, mostly just to tell them how she felt. Her dad left her with a "good luck" and nothing else. "That's when I knew I didn't want to talk to them again. He didn't care." She says she blocked them both and seems OK with that.

Her sights are set on bigger things. Music is the priority, but she wants to be in movies, too — an action star or a Marvel superhero. Her next music video, which she filmed after a few weeks of combat training, could prove to be the perfect audition. Not that she has anyone else to impress. As she puts it: "I'm out here to prove myself right." 📺



# Who You Gonna Call?

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In the Greater Manchester area, a vigilante group of anonymous locals are working together to fight crime. Rolling Stone UK meets the Crimewatchers in their small town of Droylsden to learn the story behind their formation and to find out how they operate

**By Ellie-Jo Johnstone**

Photography by Callum High



**LOOKOUT**  
Local people do  
five-hour nightly  
circuits of the  
Droylsden area in  
a bid to cut crime





## E

VERY CRIMEFIGHTER HAS an origin story. The Droylsden Crimewatchers didn't possess mutant genes. Nor did they have an evil supernatural baddie to beat. Their beginnings were understated and almost inconsequential: it all started with a Facebook post.

It was September 2020, and an ex-mechanic in Droylsden – a small town in Tameside, Greater Manchester – had seen somebody breaking into a property on his mum's street. He had been furloughed from his job at the height of the coronavirus pandemic and had a lot of time to spare, so when the burglar escaped, he decided to take matters into his own hands.

He aired his plans in a local Facebook community group. "Due to all the burglaries going on round here at the moment, tonight between 1–4am, me and a few others will be patrolling the streets keeping a lookout," he wrote. Within 24 hours, the post had received nearly 1,000 likes.

"It all escalated from there," he says.

Today, the Droylsden Crimewatchers' official Facebook page has more than 11,000 followers. They've dealt with break-ins, theft, knife crime, anti-social behaviour, suicide prevention and community maintenance. To locals, the Crimewatchers are heroes, and they (along with their Alsatian patrol dog) have become a social media sensation. But what do Greater Manchester Police (GMP) make of them?

Meeting in a closed cocktail bar in Droylsden on a Saturday morning, the Crimewatchers – who wish to remain anonymous – come across as an approachable bunch of working-class lads with big plans. As well as the ex-mechanic, a bouncer, a roofer and a locksmith are just a few of a posse who were labelled "not to be trusted" by the local police force back in 2021. They represent a large part of an organisation that tackles petty crime at ground level.

#### DROYLSDEN DEFENDERS

(Right) many of the group juggle jobs alongside crimefighting



Prompted by the Crimewatchers' initial Facebook post, locals volunteered to join the founder on his nightly patrol. New members undergo a strict vetting process: credit checks, security qualifications and other background searches are carried out to ensure volunteers are legitimate. Just as important is that recruits "fit in with the banter" – the group describe themselves to me as "brothers", companions who they "wouldn't think twice about crying in front of".

When asked why there are no females in Crimewatchers official patrol squad, I'm informed that it's not because women aren't allowed, as several females have very recently offered to join the organisation, just that there are no formal members yet.

Everyone has their own reasons for getting involved in the vigilante justice group: the bouncer states that he feels "passionate about protecting the community" while the locksmith just wants "local people to feel safe" where they are living.

Droylsden is infamously referred to as "D-town" by Mancunians who've lived there long enough to have ventured into The Cotton Tree – a pub that closed back in 2013 after a high-profile murder took place

there. Labelled as a spot that's "almost gentrified" by the local rag, it's got a craft beer shop, a Moravian settlement and a pizza place. It's also got a crime problem. In Droylsden East, crime rates are higher than the Tamesdale average of 208 offences per 1,000 people, with a significantly greater incidence of theft.

It doesn't help that between 2011 and 2019, the Conservative government slashed financing for the Greater Manchester Police by £215 million, resulting in 2,000 fewer police officers, 1,000 fewer support staff and cuts to other essential related resources. With around two-thirds of the police's funding coming directly from government grants each year, the effects of these cuts can be seen within communities like Droylsden and its surrounding suburbs.

One Crimewatchers member explains that others have tried to set up similar operations within Greater Manchester to tackle the increased crime. Although they don't identify them specifically, the Crimewatchers make it clear that they are different. "They've got people with criminal records and stuff out on patrol in the group, and they don't have the same level of community support," he says resolutely.

I ask each member to recall a memorable incident from their time with the Crimewatchers. The cocktail bar's cleaner drags a Henry Hoover around right next to us, forcing the lads to shout over one another as they recall cases involving broken fingers, violent standoffs, and one incident where a man in a balaclava "pulled out a massive knife". The bouncer puts his cappuccino down and uses his hands to illustrate the size of the knife and the height of the offender. Both were impossibly huge.

They then explain that they patrol the streets of Droylsden and neighbouring Audenshaw from 12am to 5am every night. Afterwards, they post their findings on





the Crimewatchers Facebook page before heading back to their day jobs. It sounds like a watered-down Marvel film plot, but without the tights.

They also respond to call-outs. To get in touch, Droylsden and Audenshaw residents either message Crimewatchers on social media or use a designated WhatsApp patrol number. One cry for help came from an elderly lady who rang about her husband, saying, "It's not a crime, but it's an emergency."

"Tony fell," she said, "and he can't get up. I know he's not hurt; I just need him to get up," the Crimewatchers founder recalls. Remembering this conversation word for word, the founder states that his own father was ill for a short while before he passed away. His personal compassion for the couple's plight was reflected in the way he and the team carefully lifted the elderly gentleman back onto his feet from the bathroom floor: "We helped him get up, we got him in bed, we got him back safely, and they couldn't thank us enough for how professional we were."

Initially reluctant to boast about their other selfless endeavours, the Crimewatchers tell of rebuilding a senior citizen's garden wall after a drink-driver destroyed it during the early hours. They've also recovered a beloved public bench from the Ashton canal, gifted 800 chocolate selection boxes to local children at Christmas, and handed out more than 200 panic alarms to women in the immediate area. They claim that this isn't only about justice, it's about community.

"It's not all about crime, it's about vulnerable people and being there when it's needed," they stress. But this ethos hasn't always been appreciated by the mainstream media or the local police. The Crimewatchers have previously been criticised for "possibly conducting illegal 'stop and searches'" and "chasing people from one street to another" by the Greater Manchester Police.

As an outsider, it's easy to see how the organisation could be deemed an undercover vigilante operation. They answer their patrol phone, mobilise the

**PAW PATROL**  
(Above)  
Alsatian  
Shadow is a  
new canine  
recruit; (right)  
volunteers  
are vetted  
before they  
can join the  
operation



troops, and prevent crime, taking matters into their own hands in dark uniforms while accompanied by an Alsatian.

However, the group definitively refute this vigilante label as they openly discuss their relationship with the police and the emergency services. Just a few months after criticising them, the police did a U-turn, praising the Crimewatchers as essential "active citizens". The members



recall the night they met with sergeants after stopping two men from breaking into a vehicle on Buxton Lane, Droylsden. The police thanked them and informally offered to help them become special constables and to assist them in getting access to patrol vehicles. When it comes to dealing with the emergency services, one says, “When a lot of people are calling 999 and speaking to the operators, they’re directing them straight to us as they know that they’re probably not going to respond to these small incidents.”

Speaking to Rolling Stone UK, a press officer at GMP confirms that “The Greater Manchester Police and the local authority have spoken to the group before and we support them. They are basically a private security company with insurance.”

Evidence of this collaborative relationship between the emergency services and Crimewatchers can be found in their daily Facebook posts. As recently as 25 March, the group “congratulated the police on a job well done and they thanked us for our help. They then asked us to check on a few residents who were woken up by what was going on.” Instances of the police asking how the dog is and congratulating them on their brave efforts have also been recounted in these posts, suggesting that perhaps the two services are able to operate in harmony.

Tameside’s Chief Inspector of Neighbourhoods, Lee Broadstock, told the *Tameside Reporter* that the force “will always want to work with active citizens, and as the police, we know we can’t solve all the problems ourselves – we need to work in partnership”. After meeting with the members in person last year, it became clear to Broadstock that both organisations have the same aim. Previous statements which labelled the group as



**BADGE OF HONOUR**  
The uniforms have been paid for through fundraising

## “THE GREATER MANCHESTER POLICE HAVE SPOKEN TO THE GROUP AND SUPPORT THEM”



**BACKUP BRIGADE**  
The group have gained the trust of locals and Greater Manchester Police

“vigilantes” were retracted by the Chief as he emphasised that “he doesn’t subscribe to the vigilante tag that has been used before”. Instead, he referred to the local lads as “people active in their community who want to work with the police”.

As all Crimewatchers members are aware, the GMP are out dealing with serious crimes and high-priority situations every single day, whereas their role is about checking in on members of the local community and providing peripheral support. They’re a deterrent or the first port of call, and although most people understand this now, the group still receive the odd Facebook comment from a local gossip, accusing them of “wanting to be the police” or “wishing they were the popo”.

They rely entirely on donations and community fundraisers. “Every month is up and down,” explains the locksmith, an integral Crimewatchers member who offers his services for free to those who have been broken into within the local area.

Droylsden businesses such as The Jam Works, the bar named after the iconic Robertson’s Jam Factory, have hosted several fundraising events and collected donations over the past 18 months. Without this help, the founder explains that they “didn’t have the insurance that we’ve got now, we didn’t have the uniforms, we didn’t have the torches, the equipment, all the walking boots and everything.”

Their goal is simple: to raise enough money to set up a boxing gym for young people. The Crimewatchers want to get the younger generation training in their facilities, so that they will be “focused, and in a completely different mindset”. Occupying the impressionable minds of youths who are currently “going around with their rucksacks on and their BMX’s

selling drugs or trying car doors” is seen as a way to tackle crime at its source.

The founder would also love to make enough cash “to be able to reward or pay these guys who are protecting me and others whilst doing so much work in the community”. All members of the Crimewatchers continue to work on a completely voluntary basis.

You can’t talk about the Crimewatchers without mentioning Sabre. Known in the community as the founder’s iconic sidekick, Sabre was, his owner and the organisation’s founder says, “a bit of a celebrity”. Laughing about his fame, he jokes that “if we put up a picture of someone who tried to steal a motorbike or something, that’d get about five hundred likes, but post a picture of Sabre in the swimming pool and it’d get twelve hundred.” The rest of the team chuckle at this.

Unfortunately, just before Christmas, they lost Sabre due to old age. In his honour, they want to raise enough money to get a defibrillator installed in Droylsden town centre. Smiling as he holds back tears, the founder explains that a new canine companion, Shadow, is learning the ropes and “already walks like he’s on patrol”.

As we close our conversation, the Crimewatchers emphasise that community lies at the heart of what they do – their actions, their motives and, ultimately, their existence. “From what we’ve learned, it’s obviously the power of the people,” says the founder. “If enough people are behind you, you can achieve anything, honestly.” A final fist bump is passed around the group before the lads cross the main road and split off in different directions. Each is heading home to rest before their next patrol begins in fewer than 12 hours – although for all of them Crimewatchers is a 24-hour occupation. ®



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# ART ON VINYL

**Rolling Stone UK meets three homegrown masters of record sleeve design: Peter Saville CBE, Keith Breeden and Malcolm Garrett MBE**

BY LEE CAMPBELL



**“The album sleeve that you carried into school said so much about you without you having to say a word”  
— Garrett**

**Y**OU WOULDN'T IN YOUR WILDEST DREAMS have

expected to be a singular success at anything; just to hopefully get by. This has been a wonder to us for 40 years,” says Peter Saville as he reflects on what he and fellow record sleeve designers Keith Breeden and Malcolm Garrett have achieved in the British music industry. They are a trio I like to call the ‘Holy Trinity’ of artwork and graphic design in the music world.

From the rise of punk until the mid-80s and 90s, individually these three men masterminded the record sleeve artwork and band merchandise for around 100 artists. From Duran Duran’s *Rio* to New Order’s *Power, Corruption & Lies*, some of the most memorable album and single covers resulted from their creative vision.

What is almost as extraordinary as their legacy is that they all studied A-level art together at St Ambrose College in Altrincham, south-west of Manchester, from 1973-1974.

Today’s video interview is the first time they have spoken together since the mid-80s. Garrett is sharing Saville’s video link from the former’s home/office in Clerkenwell, London. Breeden, meanwhile, is calling in from the wilds of Llanfihangel in central, rural Wales. He is softly spoken and measured in his delivery, while Saville is expressive and flamboyant. Garrett is somewhere in the middle.

At school, an unassuming mentor had the most profound effect on these three young lads from the north-west of England. “If it wasn’t for a man called Peter

David Hancock, this would not have happened,” says Saville. “We were all under his tutelage since we were 13 or 14 years old. He was a hip, young art teacher and he was very open-minded to the kinds of work that we could do. All sorts of experimental things. He recognised our passion and vocation for

a ‘coup d’état’ in pop culture that was punk and for around 18 months, the back door of entertainment was open to anyone that wanted to contribute.”

Breeden agrees: “In those days, a lot of the bands, they couldn’t play, they couldn’t write, they couldn’t sing. Do you remember

be honest, I was always trying to be as good as Keith,” he confides.

“We were always in record shops looking at sleeves,” recalls Breeden. He remembers being drawn to them as a child. “It’s like a lot of things in life, it’s about accessibility and expectations. As a kid, I never had access to art. It wasn’t on my radar. Our access to art was perhaps only through record sleeves.”

For him, they possessed aura and mystique. “They build a corporate image for the band. I remember the Pink Floyd album [*Ummagumma*] when I was a youngster, where they laid out all the musical equipment on a runway. I remember looking at it, saying, ‘This must mean something.’ I thought that Pink Floyd had the keys to some knowledge that I didn’t have.”

Garrett has similar memories of record covers that made a lasting impression on him. “I was particularly into German electronic music. I distinctly remember the Faust album. It was clear vinyl, in a clear sleeve with red screen-printing. I was always interested in things that had a physicality, a hard-edged graphic flavour, and obviously, the Warhol banana on the Velvet Underground album [*The Velvet Underground & Nico*].”

“We related to record covers as a study in their own right, independent of the music that was in them,” adds Saville, who at just 23 became co-founder and art director of the now legendary Factory Records, working with Rob Gretton, Martin Hannett, Alan Erasmus and the enigmatic Tony Wilson. “Part of our fixation was the visual work. We saw the record cover as our form or medium of pop art.”



**IN REVERSE** Saville’s cover for Joy Division’s *Unknown Pleasures*

visual art and said, ‘Have you boys considered graphic design?’”

“It was a term we had never heard of,” adds Garrett.

“We didn’t imagine that it would necessarily work out or we would amount to much,” says Saville.

Garrett remarks that they “struck lucky” by starting their careers at the right time: punk was a catalyst and a game-changer.

Saville elaborates, “There was

The Desperate Bicycles? They were useless, but that was the way it was.”

The boys gathered influences from a range of sources, including themselves. Garrett underlines this: “I was always drawing inspiration from Keith. He was the star and had an amazing imagination. For my part, I liked letters and words.” He declares, laughing, that he wasn’t particularly skilled at drawing. “To



Creating a record sleeve was the epitome of rebellion against the disciplines of visual communication, a sentiment that appealed to all three. “None of the criteria of communications design is applicable to record cover design,” says Saville, “so by doing record sleeves, all of us were granted an extension of our adolescence.”

The glamour was also a draw. “We wanted to be hip. Doing a record sleeve is almost like being in a band,” says Saville.

It wasn’t a lucrative occupation, however. “Sleeves are incredibly expensive but you don’t get paid much for doing them,” adds Saville. “That is an indicator of their real

value. It was during our working period that the music video became predominant and album sleeve budgets just disappeared.”

**W**HEN ASKED TO REVEAL a significant album cover that they masterminded, Breeden dives in first. “I did a record sleeve for [an album by] Scritti Politti called *Cupid & Psyche* in ’85. I had a couple of years that were a bit of a watershed for work. I did ABC’s [*How to Be a Zillionaire!*] at that time also.”

Returning to his work on *Cupid & Psyche*, he says: “We were going to do something totally different and it didn’t work out. I was left with about three or four days to

spare and there were all these bits kicking round the studio. The head of marketing at Virgin had a firm that did this [embossed] block foil finish. He was keen to use it, so I thought it would be a great opportunity.

“Scritti Politti was really the creative vehicle of one person: lead singer Green Gartside. He was, like me, a perfectionist, and very visually aware. He had a very clear idea about what he wanted. If you listened to his music, it’s very literary, very thoughtful. The sleeve conveys the feeling of the music as best as anything I think that I did without words. With Scritti, there was a richness of texture to the sound and the lyrics.

The music in its layering was almost visceral. All of the Scritti stuff was about touch and feel. It was like chocolate; the sensory nature of things. The contrast between the masking tape and the signature stuff, the block foil, encapsulated everything.”

Garrett offers a completely different genre. “For me, it’s *A Different Kind of Tension* by the Buzzcocks [in 1979]. The first two albums were compromised in different ways. I was trying to please the band, so for the third album I thought, ‘Fuck the band! I’ll please myself and come up with something that I think represents the band.’

“The title was the only thing I knew about the album at the time,” he continues. “I went to see Pete Shelley, who was the one person in the band that I really connected with, aside from Richard Boon, the manager. I showed Pete the visual for this sleeve which was a bit excessive. Pete loved it.

“I discovered when I listened to the album that my favourite track was ‘I Believe’. Today it remains my favourite. Pete Shelley at that time was going through a bit of a breakdown, taking too many psychedelic drugs, he was unhappy – the usual rock’n’roll pressures. It was the last album before he would go and make a solo album. This was the third album. The first had a square picture, the second had a circular picture, so the third for me had to have a triangular.”

Garrett continues, “There’s one line in ‘I Believe,’ which to this day I’m not sure if it was already written or whether he wrote it after seeing my visual: ‘*Triangular cover concealing another aspect from view.*’ When I heard that I thought, ‘Wow! Either I’ve had a premonition or Pete has seen the sleeve rough and written that line.’ I was very interested in continuity. It was the angularity and the depth or layers of the Buzzcocks’ songs that appealed to me. I captured that.”

Another contender could have been Garrett’s cover for Duran Duran’s *Rio*, which is generally acknowledged as one of the best album covers of all time.

“For the *Rio* sleeve, I didn’t do or choose the [Patrick Nagel]







**BOS CLASSICS**  
Saville's 'colour wheel' design for the back cover of New Order's *Power, Corruption & Lies*; (left) Garrett used Patrick Nagel's image on the *Rio* cover

## "We saw the record cover as our form of pop art" — Saville

illustration," he reveals. "That was given to me, and I took it and put it into my visual world. I refused to just take an image and put it on the sleeve. For me, you had to have a longevity with all the singles and all the promotional material. It was part of an entire visual language. So, I took it and put it into a graphic framework."

He reflects on Rio's cultural impact. "Young people say to me, 'That sleeve made me want to become a graphic designer.' I feel good that I was able to deliver something that had a real effect on a significant number of people all over the world. It is truly a global record."

It is no surprise that Saville chooses an album cover from the Factory Records stable: New Order's *Power, Corruption & Lies*.

"It's truly biographic and I didn't realise it was when I was doing it," he says. "It's kind of partnered with 'Blue Monday'. They are one and the same. It has been quite influential in what some people refer to now as 'The Big Flat Now' – the convergence

between the disciplines."

Odd though it may seem, the sleeve concept would be created without its designer having listened to the music. Saville reveals: "Usually, you don't get to hear these records before you design the cover. The sequencing of the tracks is really important to the listening experience. The deadline for the record cover is the same day as what's called 'the cut'. The artwork deadline can never be before the cut, due to track listing, timing, but as soon as it's cut, some fucker will say, 'Where's the sleeve?'"

"Only once have I heard the record before I've done the sleeve, even with Factory Records. For *Power, Corruption & Lies*, I did what I wanted to do, but when I listened to it, there is a synergy between the conflation of romanticism and tech – that is front and back of the sleeve, mirrored in the opening track, 'Age of Consent', where there are beats and strings, sequencers and synthesisers in juxtaposition. Keith's description of the Scritti cover being evocative

of chocolate or sensation, sensuousness – that felt right. There's a kind of empathy which happens serendipitously."

Saville could just as easily have chosen another of his designs: *Unknown Pleasures* by Joy Division is arguably one of the most iconic album sleeves.

He explains its origins: "Their manager Rob Gretton gave me a folder with some track titles, samples, a photocopy from a newspaper and the diagram from *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Astronomy*. He said that the band would like it white on the outside and black on the inside."

"I went into the studio in Manchester that I had access to at the time – early '79. That was my first album cover and I used the photo mechanical transfer (PMT) camera to try and figure out what I was doing. There was a wonderful new innovation in the camera room at that time which was called reversal paper. Instead of giving you a positive bromide copy, it would give you a reversal. So of course, I did a reversal of

the pulsar data and it was exotic and exciting, mysterious and very 'twilight zone' when it was white out of black."

"Whenever I attempted to put the album title or the name of the group on the front it looked like a record sleeve. I didn't want it to look like a record sleeve. There was no obligation for it to look like a record sleeve. There was no record company, and what you could call a company, I was a partner in. I made the sleeve that I would like to have at home."

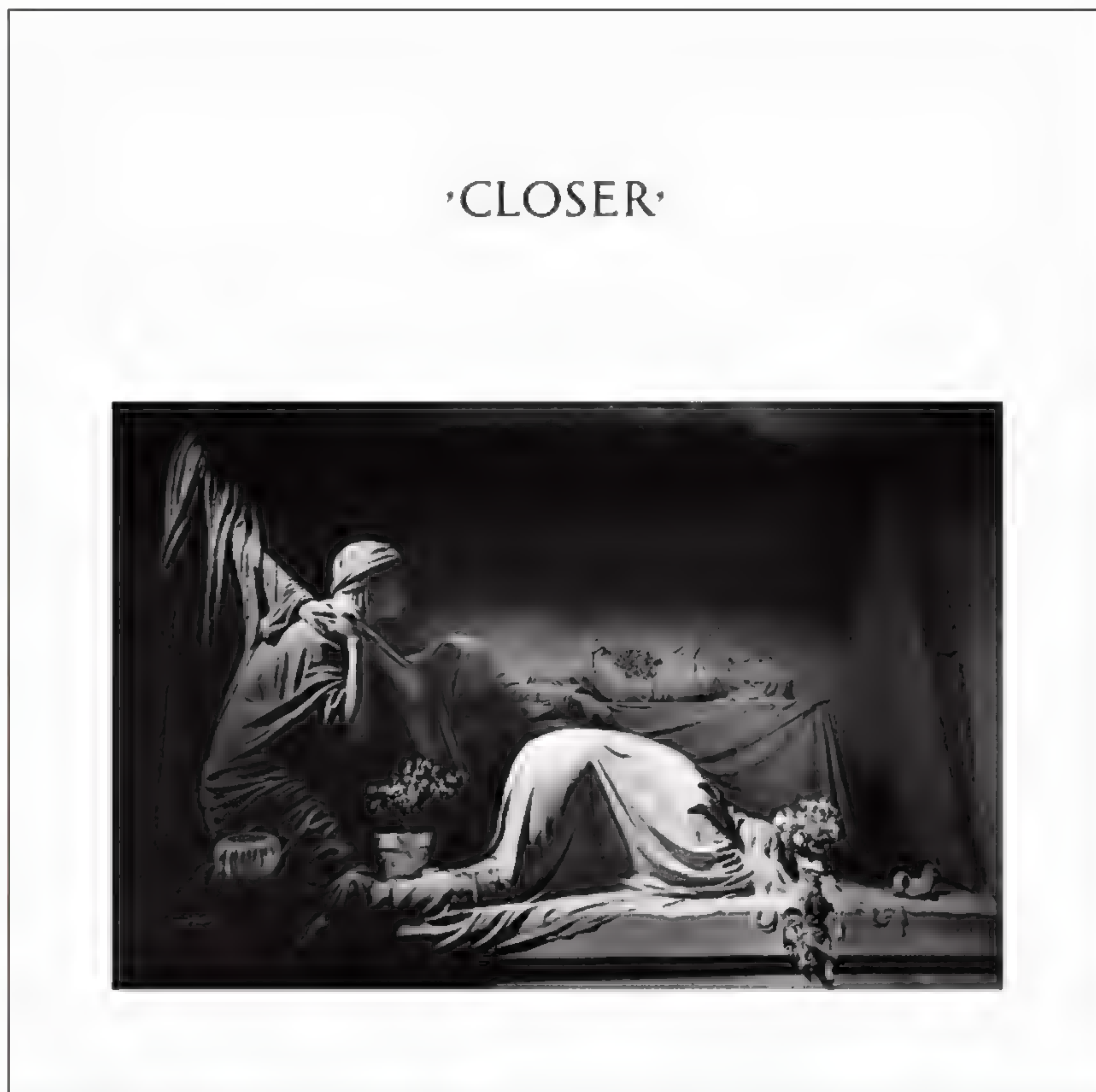
It was the "11th hour" before the artwork had to be submitted – and Saville rushed the sleeve to the band. "It's good to be the 11th or 12th hour because no one has time to talk about it. I took it round to Rob's house the next day."

Saville then adds an intriguing vignette: "He had received a test pressing of the album the day before, and he asked me if I would like to listen. I didn't really want to because what I knew of Joy Division was intense. But I couldn't really decline the offer having just done the sleeve, so I tentatively



## COVER STORIES

(below) *Cupid & Psyche* by Breeden; (bottom) 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' by Saville; (right) the haunting image for New Order's *Closer*



**"Young people say to me, 'That sleeve made me want to become a graphic designer'"**

**— Garrett**

sat down on the sofa of Rob's living room and he put on the test pressing of *Unknown Pleasures*."

**D**ESPITE THE GLAMOUR of working with major artists, it could be difficult.

While Garrett was running design group Assorted iMaGes, he delivered the sleeve design for the first four Duran Duran albums, with Breeden often assisting him in the detailed illustration work.

Garrett remembers working with the band at the height of their fame in 1983-84: "The band were in Australia at the time, and we were struggling to try and get some ideas together. At one point, I said, 'Look, the problem is, [with their management], there's seven of you, there's one of me.' We needed to

chat the thing through to get past this impasse on this particular record, *Seven and the Ragged Tiger*. So, within five days I had a visa and business-class plane ticket to Sydney. I then came back with an idea of the visual landscape, and only Keith could create that landscape."

Garrett looks back at his relationship with the band: "I had a clash with them through the entire period. They were forever wanting to work with the people they admired. They would want to work with their heroes, whether that was a photographer, illustrator or producer. The fans just want to believe that the band do it [the design], that everything came from Nick Rhodes' head and his pen."

Garrett also recalls an awkward moment on Led Zeppelin's album cover for *Coda*. "I flew to Queen's

Litho in Indianapolis, the biggest sleeve-printing factory on the planet. I made the mistake of 'improving' (in my eyes) the photograph on the back of this sleeve, which was a black and white photograph that I felt was a little bit muddy on the proof. I adjusted it to give it more contrast. By the time I got back to England, Jimmy Page was absolutely fucking furious and trashed the entire weekend's printing."

Breeden adds an anecdote from his time working with Pink Floyd's design agency Hipgnosis. "I didn't work with Pink Floyd [directly]; I worked with Storm Thorgerson, who was one part of Hipgnosis. We did a lot of work together and we clashed all the time. I love him dearly, but he was bloody hard work. He pushed me harder than probably anyone in my life. He was never satisfied. He

just wasn't a designer, really, so he couldn't tell a good design from a bad design. It was all about ideas for him, which was counterproductive.

"One particular example was for a Pink Floyd boxset. I had this image in my head of a crucifixion of a naked man raised above the water. It would have been hugely powerful. What actually transpired was a bunch of people, men and women, turned backwards. Mine was full frontal. The final image was completely compromised and watered down."

On other occasions, negative vibes meant that the prospect of working with a particular artist became nothing more than that. "Malcolm and I always harboured a desire to do something for Kraftwerk," remembers Saville. "I met Ralf Hütter at a dinner one night and



realised that working with him would be no walk in the park.”

He observes: “You don’t take well to the generation who usurp you. I had a clash of egos with everyone, one way or another, but good relationships as well. The one person where the antagonism took off before we got anywhere was Bob Geldof. Bob and I did not get past one meeting!”

They all chuckle at this before he continues, “You are generally working for that individual who is the decision-maker, except for me with Factory and Joy Division or New Order. Ian [Curtis] died before any sort of hierarchy crystallised

within Joy Division. They were still four people doing what they did. Ian was not the leader of the group. So, when they continued as New Order, Bernard, Stephen and Hooky were an absolute democracy. Not one of them took the presumption at all to be more important than the others.

“It was not until they reformed in the early 00s that they became Bernard’s band, but from 1980 to 1993 they were a democracy and a democracy of disagreements [the trio laugh]. They would disagree in principle about absolutely everything. Therefore, whenever I sought their consensus on anything, it was futile.”

Saville recalls working on a logo for their publishing company, Be Music. “I asked them, ‘What colour would you like it to be?’ Bernard said blue, Hooky said red and Stephen said green, so I turned to Gillian [Gilbert] and she said yellow. I then turned to Rob to settle it, and he said that it looked good in black. That was the end of the meeting. As they trooped out, I looked at Rob, he said, ‘Just fucking do it.’”

In contrast, choosing the sleeve for Joy Division’s second and final album, *Closer*, years before, had been harmonious – although the image became especially poignant

when lead singer Ian Curtis committed suicide shortly before its release.

Saville tells the story: “I would try to engage them, and they did collectively choose the picture for *Closer*. Obviously, none of us knew what was in Ian’s mind at that time. So that was very uncanny and unsettling, that he was part of a decision to choose a funeral image. They didn’t really know what Ian was writing and singing as he was doing his vocals at night. Only Annik [Honoré] knew what Ian’s state of mind was. She called Tony to express her concern. Tony replied, ‘Don’t worry, darling, it’s just his art.’”

Saville goes on to open up about his final memories of Curtis. “They played University of London [in February 1980]. They debuted a song that was surprisingly catchy, and Ian put on a white Vox guitar for this particular song. Everybody in the room was thinking, ‘Fucking hell, that’s a song.’ That was ‘Love Will Tear Us Apart.’ Then we went collectively together to eat nearby. He and Annik sat together at a separate table because I think there was a parting of ways at this time. Every time I glanced over at Ian and Annik, there was that ‘tears in their eyes’ look. I thought, ‘That’s a bit intense and sorrowful.’”

After the *Closer* sleeve went to print, Wilson phoned Saville to say that Curtis had died. “That caused a summit discussion because I had to point out that we had a tomb on the cover and that this could come across badly and appear to be exploitative. So, there was a crisis meeting in Manchester and the group and Rob decided that Ian had been part of the decision and so we would stick with the cover.”

**T**HE PART THEY PLAYED in popular culture is not lost on Saville, Breedon and Garrett.

The trio are united in their belief that the art of record sleeve design belongs in youthful hands.

“Young people are ‘of their times’, states Saville, with “a synergy of empathy”. “We knew what would feel right,” he continues. “At the time, the direction that the progressive groups were going had a sort of parallel as to where we were going.”



**VISIONARY**  
Malcolm  
Garrett with  
some of his  
Buzzcocks  
covers

SEBASTIAN MATTHIES



He points out, “This was our culture and as such it was a shared culture. It is what Tony Wilson would have referred to as – it used to upset me when he used this term, but these days I appreciate the enormity of it – ‘the art of the playground’. There was music. There were pop visuals. There was fashion. There were haircuts. There were movies. It is an absolutely common experience across a generation. The UK is a crucible of pop culture.”

It was a time when people were becoming more visually aware, a trend Saville puts down to David Bowie. “Young people in the 70s were starting to see that the way they looked was increasingly becoming a thing,” he says. “Bowie cannot be underestimated as an influence to us as young people in the increasing sophistication of visual literacy.”

Of course, Saville, Garrett and Breeden played their part in this, too.

“We were young practitioners of the readers of visual codes,” states Saville. “I know that all of our work has introduced younger people to ideas and imagery that their own life, schools and family had not introduced them to. They were learning through that liberty we had with record sleeves. We were all aware of a bigger world that we wanted to be a part of.”

Garrett expands on this: “There’s a period in people’s lives when music and the identity of the music that you like becomes a visual shorthand for expressing things about yourself and your own identity that you are not yet equipped to express for yourself. The album sleeve that you carried into school said so much about you without you having to say a word. The one thing I knew about myself is that I wanted to be rebellious. I wanted to be different. But I also wanted to be respected for wanting to be and look different. It’s a weird balance.”

Yet, as Saville, Garrett and Breeden grew older, they found they were no longer in tune with youth culture and decided to diversify.

For Breeden, by the late 80s, the magic of the music industry had begun to fade. “I had a couple of years where I was producing



MASTERSTROKE  
Keith Breeden  
in his studio

**“By the mid-80s, I was banned by most of the record companies in London”  
— Saville**

the best work I did, around ’85. I remember being in the basement of my studio, thinking, ‘I am packaging music for a band’ and I didn’t particularly like what they were doing. I didn’t rate it. ‘Why am I doing this? I want to be an artist.’ At the time of the stock market crash in the late 80s, the music industry suddenly became very cost-conscious, and I was quite expensive in terms of what I did – quite elaborate and labour-intensive.

“I was then pushing 40 and felt increasingly divorced from London, the music business and from youth – all the things you need to be involved with if you are going to be doing record sleeves.”

This revelation led Breeden to relocate to rural Wales, where he

now works as a portrait painter.

Saville was also branching out. “By the mid-80s, I was banned by most of the record companies in London,” he says. “I was wilful, entirely intent on doing the work I wanted to do and not the work anyone else wanted, or it would be very expensive, and it would be late, and it would be the band who would be calling the shots, and not the record company. I was too troublesome. I have always been too subjective about what is an objective medium. The same applies to all of us: we are all personal about the work,” he says. “By ’85, I was making my steps away from music into culture and museums and then into fashion. By the mid-90s, I had retired from doing record covers.”

That didn’t stop Saville from being asked, though. In 1995, when Suede’s Brett Anderson approached him to do the cover for his new album *Coming Up*, Saville said he “couldn’t possibly” do it. “He said ‘Why?’, and I said, ‘Because I’m 40, and you are... 26!’ I wrote a list of people he ought to go and see that were more his generation. It’s entirely inappropriate for 40-year-old blokes to be doing record covers for 20-year-olds. In the end, Brett went to see other people but still came back to me.” Saville relented, but, rather than design it himself, agreed to find the right people for the project.

“There was a similar situation with Jarvis [Cocker from Pulp], with *This is Hardcore*,” Saville continues.





#### WORKS OF ART

(Clockwise from above) A self portrait by Keith Breeden, who is now a portrait painter; Garrett counts his design for The Buzzcocks' album *A Different Kind of Tension* as one of his most significant works; a Factory design by Saville



"I'll bring into play the people that are needed to get what they want. In both cases, Jarvis and Brett were executive art director; I was a facilitator. They both turned out to be great sleeves, but I wouldn't have done them off my own volition. Since then, I have tried to avoid it. People still ask me, but I'm 66! Who the fuck wants a 66-year-old doing their record sleeve?"

The answer is: plenty of people. Saville is still inundated with requests. "I think the last album cover I was involved in was the [2015] New Order album, *Music Complete*. I oversaw it, assigning one of my associates to its design and layout. But even that one was carried out with some irony. From my personal point of view, it's not a New Order cover in the sense of my New Order covers. It's a cover for Bernard [Sumner]. Bernard didn't want the cover that I wanted to do, but I agreed to help get to a cover that he liked."

Saville now uses his expertise elsewhere, including the high-profile re-brand of Calvin Klein in

2017 and Burberry in 2018.

He remains in touch with his northern roots. As consultant creative director for Manchester City Council, he played a strategic role in the city's economic and cultural regeneration, and is also an artistic advisor for Manchester International Festival (MIF).

Although Cheshire-born Garrett is creative director of London design consultancy Images&Co, he is also a big player on Manchester's cultural scene. He co-founded Design Manchester in 2013, and was also involved with a major audio-visual project at the city's revitalised Band on the Wall venue, which reopened in March. He is also an Ambassador for Manchester School of Art.

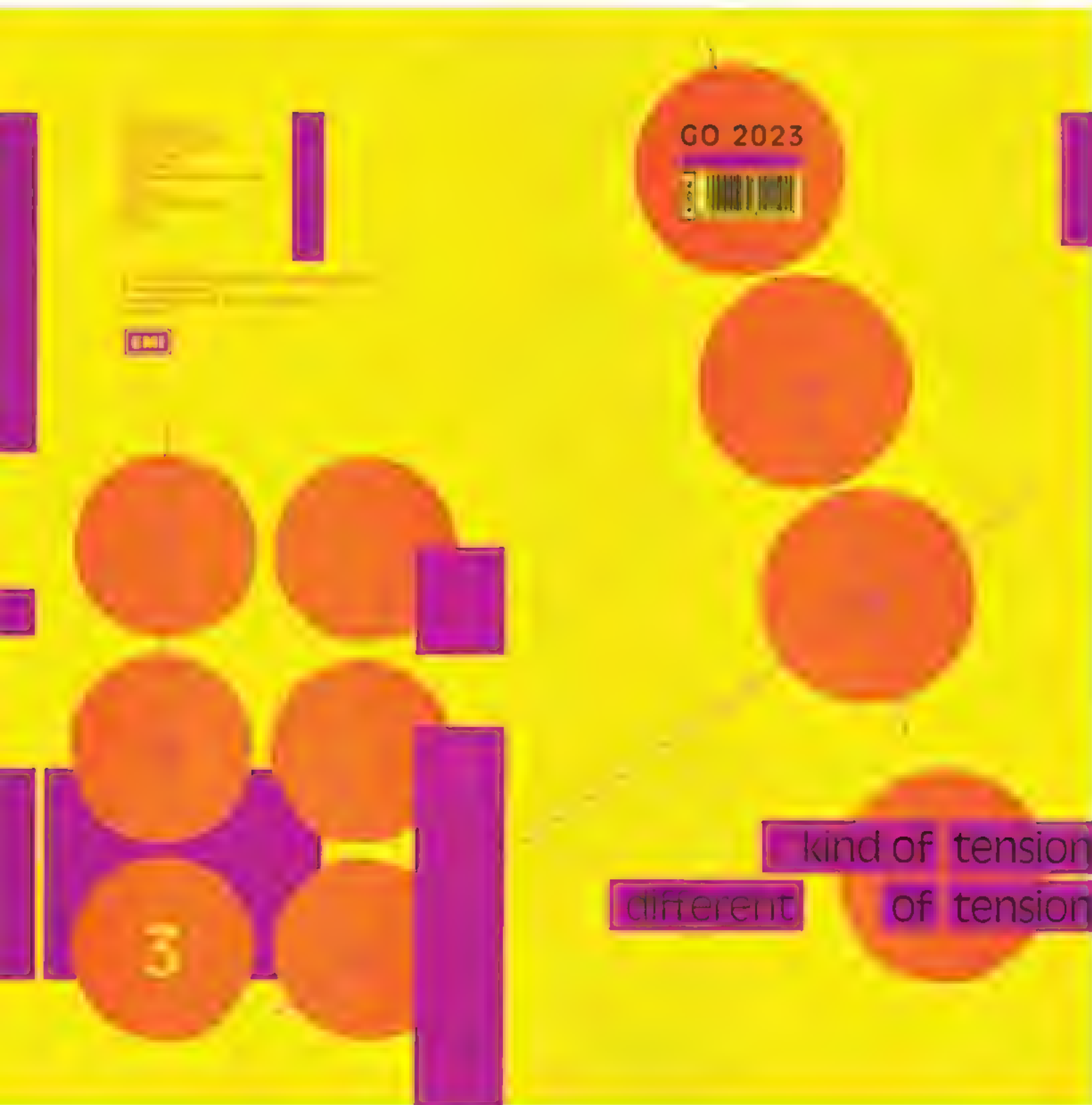
All three have no regrets about leaving their former vocation – although not music – behind. Saville says, "The only artist that I have been listening to, almost exclusively for some time now is not going to ask me to do a sleeve, because she is 700 years old – Hildegard von Bingen.

Sacred choral music, preferably with a female voice, is my ambient soundtrack these days."

As a Billie Eilish fan, Garrett's tastes are more current. "The most interesting song that I've heard recently that appeals to my sense of nostalgia from the 60s is her theme tune from *No Time to Die*. She has managed to write a Bond song that is in the right spirit of the classics from the 60s yet is nothing like them. It doesn't have any of those Bond theme clichés, but it is as powerful as 'Thunderball'."

Would he design for Eilish if she asked? Garrett is unwavering. "I would say what Peter said, 'I am the wrong person.'"

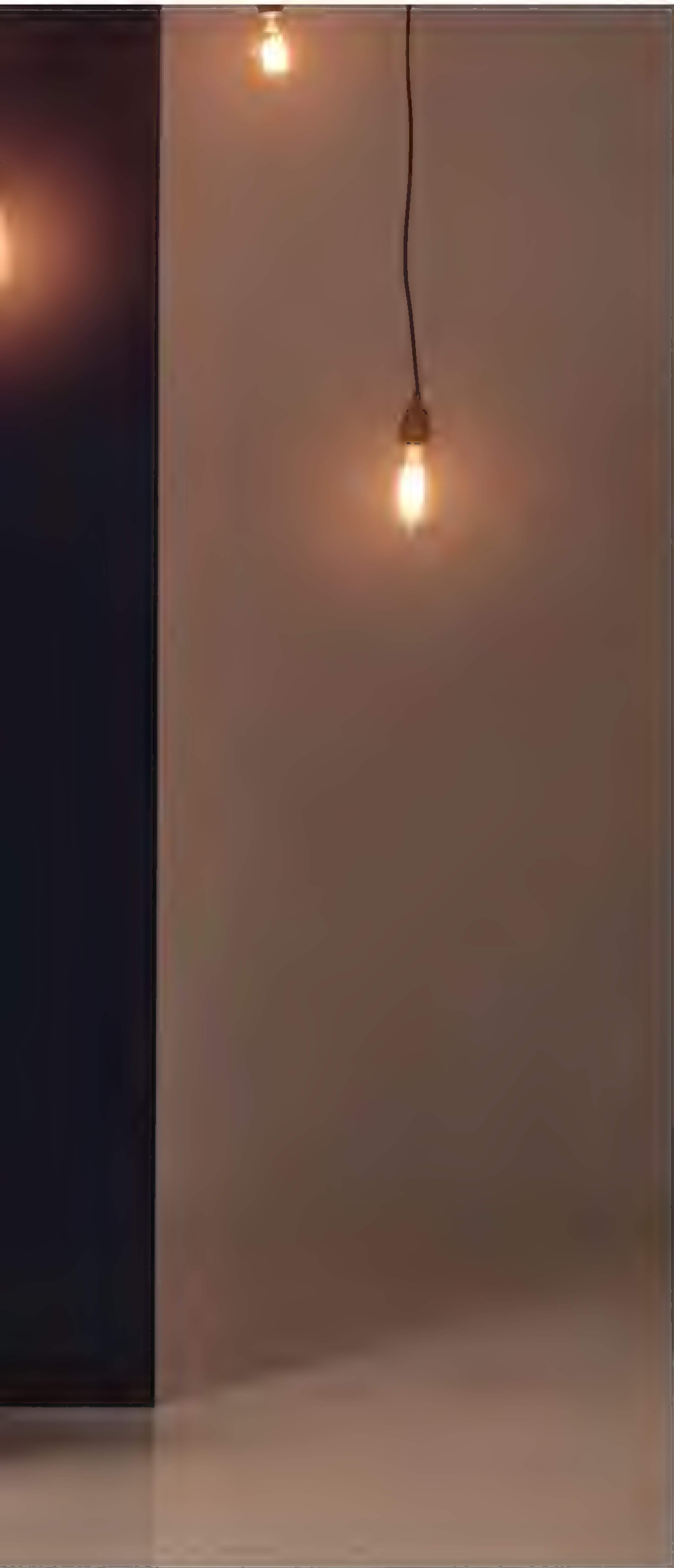
And yet the trio's pop legacy endures. "Like weird, uncanny boomerangs, things you did 30-35 years ago can come back round into your daily working routine with these 30- and 40-year anniversaries," says Saville. "It's a very weird feeling. In fact, last Friday, I was looking at a new set of proofs for New Order's 'The Perfect Kiss', and I had a distinct feeling of déjà-vu." ®











# BRIGHT YOUNG THING

As *Stranger Things* returns for its eagerly anticipated fourth season, Rolling Stone UK chats to Noah Schnapp about playing Will Byers, fan theories and how his character has matured over the years

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**BY NANA BAAH**

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**N**OAH SCHNAPP KNOWS what it's like to be a *Stranger Things* fan.

"I've only seen what you've seen," he says over Zoom from the rural countryside of Alabama, where the 17-year-old has started shooting for an upcoming film. "I've seen little clips and it looks really good, but they haven't sent it all finalised. It's like, 'I need to see more!'"

He is, of course, talking about the long-awaited fourth season of Netflix's cult horror series, *Stranger Things*. We've both been lucky enough to see the first two episodes and although we can talk about it in vague terms only, Schnapp believes that the show has really matured in its sixth year.

When the hit series started, Schnapp played 12-year-old Will Byers, who goes missing before it's discovered – by his mother Joyce, played by Winona Ryder, and his geeky gaggle of friends – that he's trapped in the mysterious twisted realm that is the Upside Down, which lurks beneath his hometown of Hawkins. Now, four seasons later, the storyline sprawls across different states and countries, taking in new characters as it does so. What's more, the monsters are scarier and the kids are all grown up and grappling with the politics of high school.

The wait for this season has been longer than previously because, like everything else

**"THAT'S SOMETHING  
STRANGER THINGS  
DOES BEST — IT  
LEAVES YOU ON A  
CLIFFHANGER"**

in the world, even the Upside Down couldn't remain unscathed by COVID. The cast flew into Atlanta to start their table reads of the script at the start of 2020, just before restrictions were brought in and everything came to a standstill. During that summer, Schnapp hung out with his cast mates and waited for filming to resume. "It was definitely over a year's break for me," he recalls. "But it was just so difficult. I think it took something like 300 days and a crazy number of hours to finish this season. It was definitely an intensive process."

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**GO-GETTER**  
Schnapp will study how to be an entrepreneur at university this year

It is worth the wait, though. Not only are the episodes much longer – "Every episode is like its own movie," observes Schnapp – but they're being released in two halves, with the first coming onto the streaming platform on 27 May 2022 and the second half on 1 July 2022. It's a strategy Schnapp is firmly behind.

"I've seen so many comments from fans saying, 'We've waited two years for this. We're gonna binge it in one day' but then you have to wait another few years. So, I think it's a nice way to release a show, it keeps the hype around – you know how with *Euphoria*, they released it weekly."

The long gap between seasons has left

plenty of time for fans to speculate. Even before the season four trailers dropped, forums were buzzing with theories about time stamps and how Eleven gets her powers back. This activity didn't go unnoticed by Schnapp. "I'll watch YouTube videos [of fan theories] and a lot of them are interesting and sometimes they're actually pretty close," he teases. "With our show, there's still so many unanswered questions and that's something *Stranger Things* does best – it leaves you on a cliffhanger with all of those unanswered questions."

Although Schnapp has tried to get a sneak peek at what the future holds for Will Byers, he, like the rest of the show's fans, is none

PREVIOUS SPREAD & THIS PAGE: ERIK CARTER.  
OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF NETFLIX



the wiser. “I’m always texting the Duffers [the *Stranger Things* creators], like ‘What is happening?’, ‘What’s next for season five?’,” he confides. “But they keep their mouths shut.”

Having said that, Schnapp is able to give a few hints as to what fans can expect from this new season. “It’s scarier and more gory,” he says. “I haven’t seen it as graphic as this yet. It does a really great job of growing up with the characters and bringing the violence and gore that we know from *Stranger Things*, but also the light and the fun with the comedic relief from Dustin and the new characters. They just do a really nice job this season of tying

open to that, especially with costumes as well. I can say that I think Will would wear this or this.”

Another unexpected bonus of being on the show for so long is that 80s music has wormed its way into Schnapp’s affections. The Clash’s ‘Should I Stay or Should I Go’ and ‘Africa’ by Toto were played multiple times during the first season. Schnapp has now acquired an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the era – to the extent that even his dad is impressed. “I feel like I’ve grown up in the 80s at this point. My dad always tells me when he’s watching the show, like, ‘Oh my God, I can’t believe

NOAH SCHNAPP

stars to lean on has been a lifeline. “We’re like a family at this point, I grew up with these people and we all relate and have the same story with the whole ‘being in the limelight’ situation,” he says. “I really appreciate the fan base. When people come up to me on the street, I still wonder, ‘How do they know who I am without the bowl cut?’ It’s just crazy.”

But Schnapp wants to be known for more than being Will Byers from *Stranger Things*, so he is turning his attention to other projects. “I’ve always wanted to expand beyond just being an actor, maybe one day being a director, or a producer and now an entrepreneur,” he reveals.

In December 2021, Schnapp shared on Instagram the moment he opened his acceptance letter from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania to study Entrepreneurship and Innovation this autumn. But the wheels of his business ventures are already in motion: he’s a consultant for Roll, an app that lets fans see exclusive photos and videos by their favourite creators. He has also invested in different brands and start-ups and is working on a clothing collaboration. In October 2021, Schnapp founded his own company, TBH, a snack brand that’s focused on health and sustainability. So far, they have launched a hazelnut butter, but there’s more to come.

“I love being a leader and having control over things, so launching and owning a business lets me do that,” he tells me. “I love the creative side of acting and I’m actually dipping my feet into producing projects, which is all I can say right now,” he says. “I’m still young, so I’m just trying out new things.” ®

## “I LOVE BEING A LEADER AND HAVING CONTROL OVER THINGS, SO LAUNCHING AND OWNING A BUSINESS LETS ME DO THAT”

everything in but showing our characters growing up.”

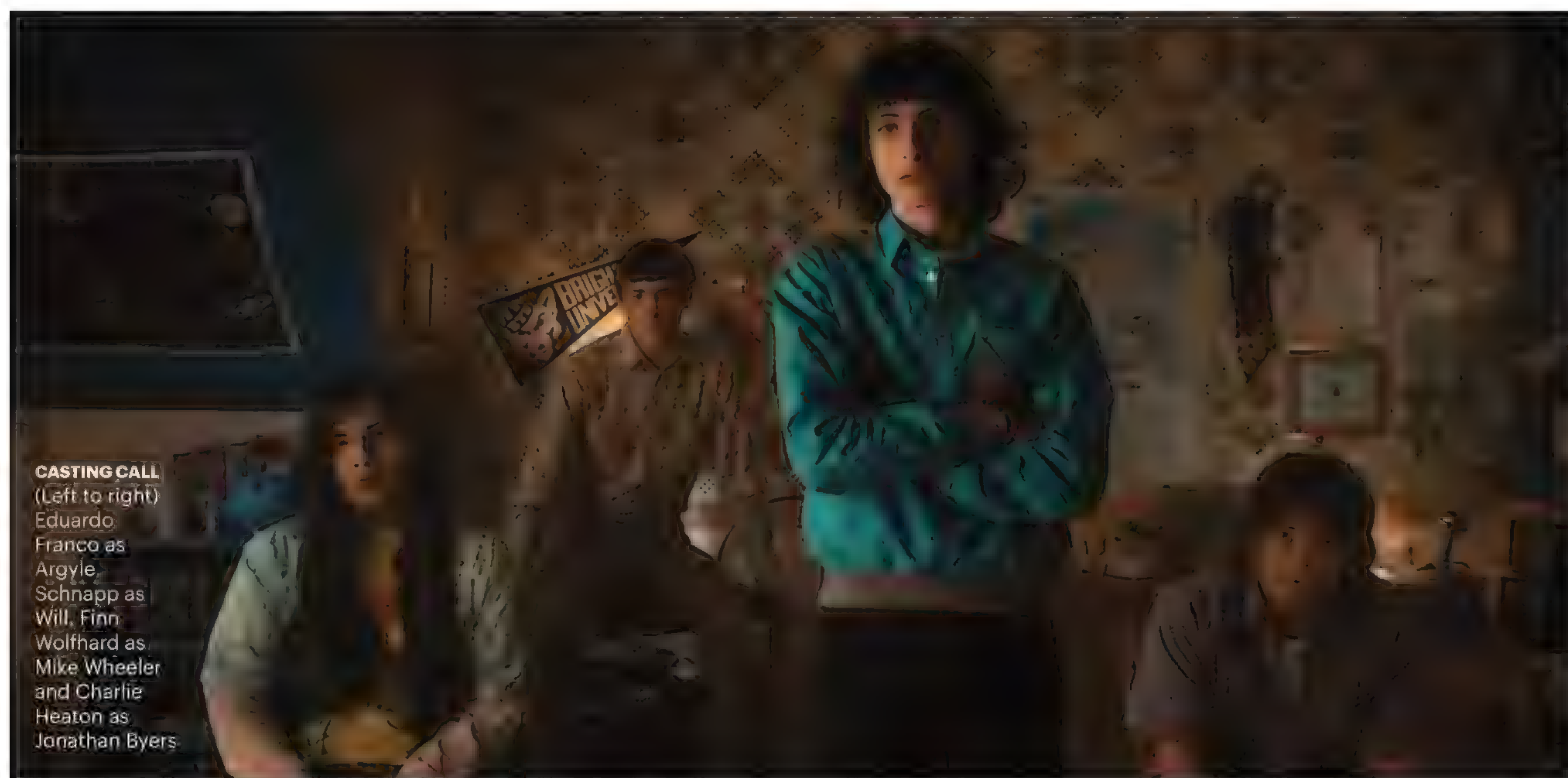
Will has certainly changed, he adds. “In season one, he was very shy and wouldn’t really come out of his shell and then he went into the Upside Down and he kind of was traumatised by that ever since. But I think it also taught him to be brave and to stand up for himself.”

Having played Will Byers for the past six years, Schnapp now has more input into his character. “Once we’re on set, we can make edits and improvise. The Duffers are super

you’re using that.’ It’s crazy how authentic [it is] and how well they do it.”

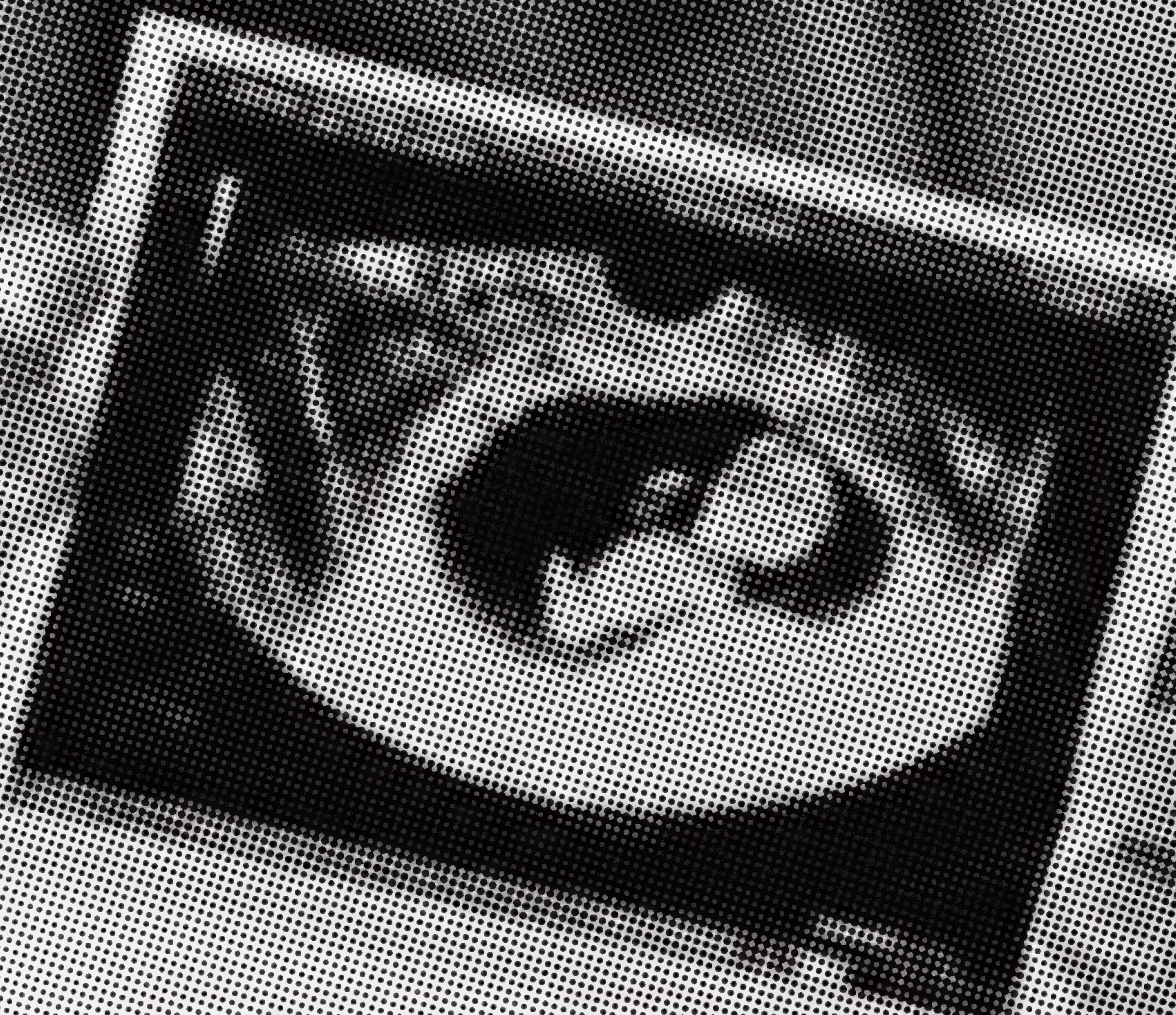
**B**ACK IN THE real world, it’s no secret that being a child star can be difficult. Schnapp’s *Stranger Things* co-star and friend Millie Bobby Brown recently opened up on *The Guilty Feminist* podcast about the sexualisation she has faced since turning 18.

As the youngest member of the core cast, Schnapp was catapulted into the spotlight at the age of 10, but he says that having his co-



**CASTING CALL**  
(Left to right)  
Eduardo  
Franco as  
Argyle  
Schnapp as  
Will, Finn  
Wolfhard as  
Mike Wheeler  
and Charlie  
Heaton as  
Jonathan Byers





**SUBSCRIBE**



# THE

Children who were  
filmed from birth for  
their parents' online  
content are now  
coming of age. Rolling  
Stone UK speaks to the  
parents and children  
belonging to this first  
heavily documented  
generation

# TRUMAN

# BABIES

by Amelia  
Tait



# When Tripp Ellis was born on 18 December 2008,

SOME OF THE FIRST WORDS he heard were: “Oh, he is long!”. A nurse in a Santa hat rubbed his purple body with a towel as his mother, Lora, stared at him adoringly. “Hey,” she greeted her newborn son, wiping a tear from her eye. I – along with 5.2 million others – know this because Tripp’s birth was uploaded to YouTube on Boxing Day that year and regular vlogs of the rest of his life followed.

On 31 December 2009, Tripp took his first steps as a camera videoed him from the sidelines. In December 2011, he went to Disney World for the first time and shouted “I’m happy!” from the carousel (later, he was apprehensive when meeting Buzz Lightyear, bowing his head and chewing his thumb). In November 2013, Tripp got his first fat lip after someone pushed him at school. In March 2019, he beat his entire family at mini golf, but he didn’t gloat.

Ten years before Tripp was born, in 1998, Paramount Pictures released *The Truman Show*, a dramedy in which Jim Carrey plays Truman Burbank, a man whose life has been filmed and broadcast from the moment of his birth. Hidden cameras documented Truman’s every move; millions watched from diners, sofas and even bathtubs. In 2005, director Peter Weir noted that it was once “a dangerous film to make” because “it couldn’t happen”, but as reality television burgeoned in the years after its release, the movie came to

be considered remarkably prescient. “It” happened, to some degree, on shows like *The Real World*, *Big Brother* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. The real Trumans, however, would be found on YouTube, which launched in 2005.

There are now hundreds of children whose everyday existence has been broadcast fodder since birth. ‘Family vlogging’ took off when Idaho father Shay Butler began uploading videos of his

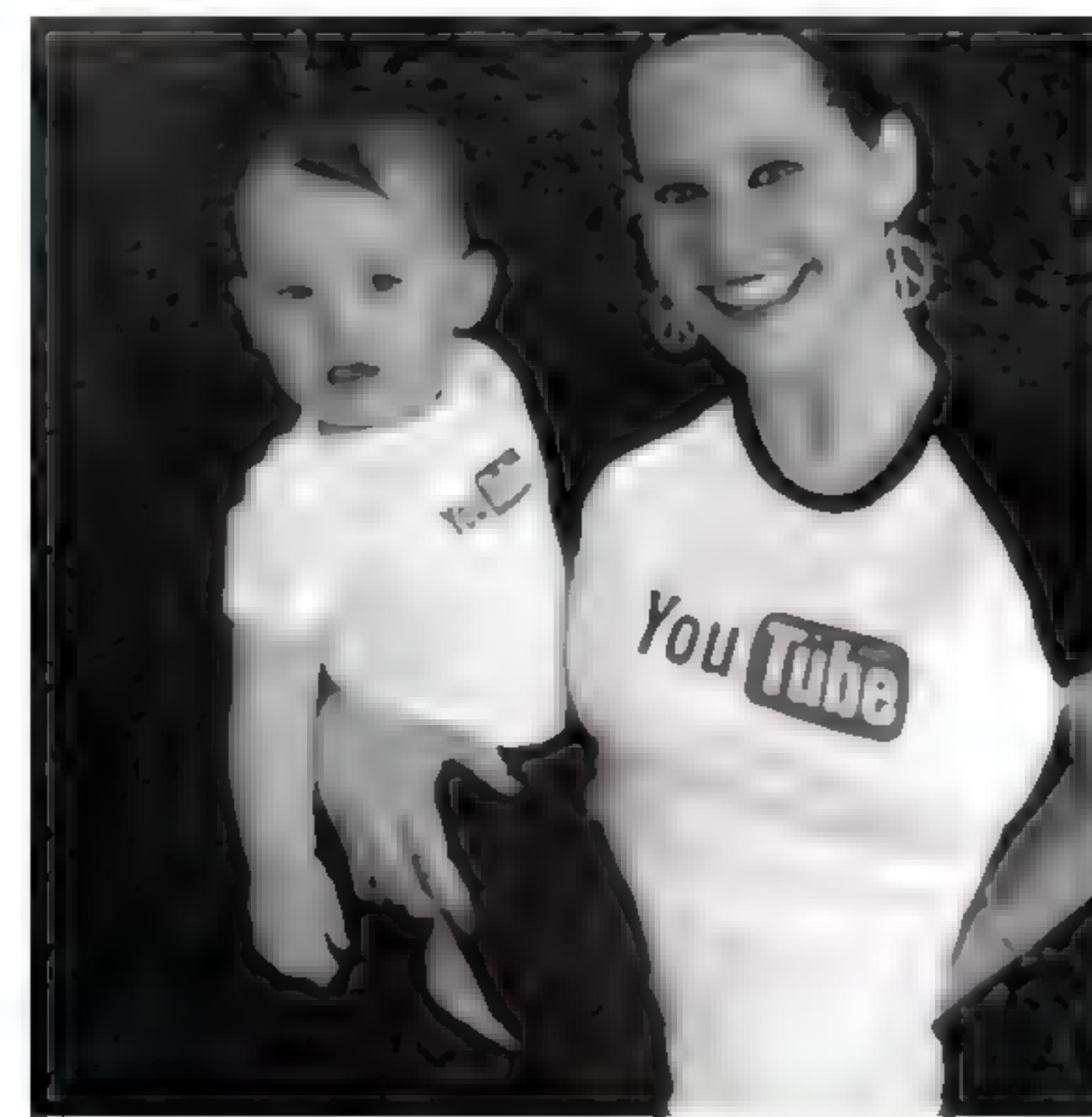
children in 2008. This means the world’s oldest ‘Truman babies’ are now hitting their teens. Unlike Truman, these children haven’t been misled, the people around them aren’t actors; they’re aware they’re on YouTube and that the world they live in isn’t a film set. But still, thousands of strangers have observed their every move.

“I think it’s cool,” remarks 13-year-old Tripp, when asked how it feels that five million people watched his birth. Clad in a light-blue T-shirt and with swooping dark hair, he looks younger than your typical teen, but speaks in a confident, considered way, rarely looking to his mother for reassurance.

Tripp has three younger siblings: Declan (whose birth clocked up 5.9 million views), Everett (7.6 million), and Lyla-Jade (4.4 million – Tripp even helped film it). When asked why he thinks people like to watch his family, Tripp says: “It’s not, like, fake. It’s all just real stuff. Everything we actually do.”

## RIDE OF YOUR LIFE

Lora and baby Tripp advertise the channel; (below) Lora and Tripp on the Teacups at Disney World

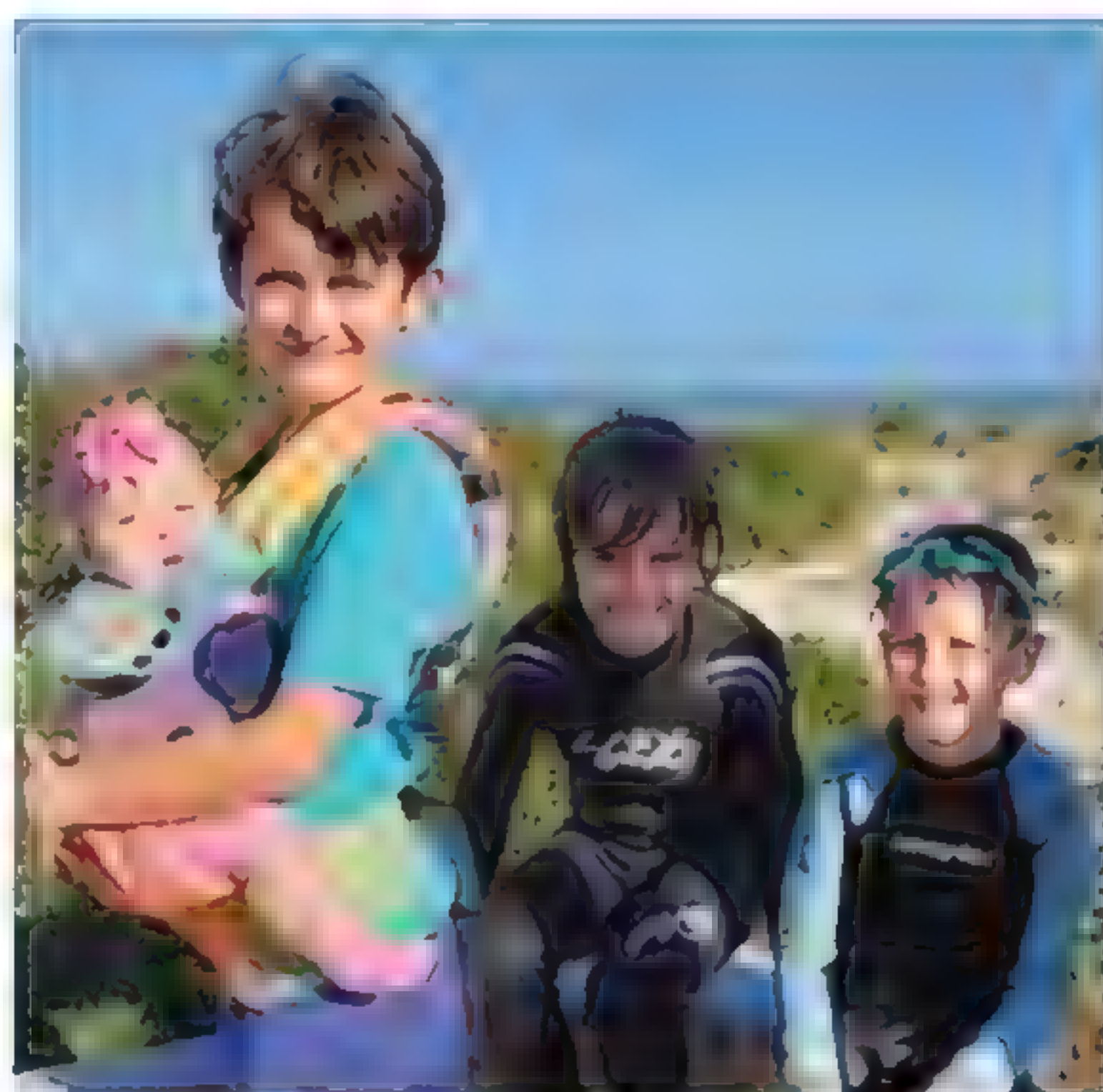




**“It’s not fake.  
It’s all real stuff.  
Everything we  
actually do”**  
— **Tripp**

The Ellis family live on Amelia Island, Florida, and their channel, LoraAndLayton, has 276,000 subscribers, who are mostly women aged 18–40.

“I’ve kind of been obsessed with filming my entire life,” says 33-year-old Lora, who bought her first camera with babysitting money aged 11 and took it to sleepovers, parties and even restaurants. Lora attributes her obsession to her “Bubba”, her grandfather, who would always record family get-togethers. As a child, Lora used to play the tapes back for hours, sometimes viewing the same one four times in a row. She was “hooked”.



**MOVIE MAGIC**  
(Top) The Ellis brood: Lyla-Jade, Tripp, Declan and Everett; (left) the boys with mum Lora while she was pregnant; (below) the Ellis family minus Tripp

In 2006, Lora started uploading quick, silly YouTube videos; two years later, she vlogged her pregnancy to keep faraway family up to date. When her channel took off, she saw it as a way to “help other mums”, but she also loved the creative outlet, and says editing videos kept her calm. “I just felt like so much of what we saw on TV and the internet all the time was just dark. I wanted to share light.”

Lora admits that her children have grown up thinking being on YouTube is normal. Tripp doesn’t recall the particular moment when he realised he was living his life on film. But 13-year-old Zoe Killen’s earliest memory is of playing with her sister and looking up to see her mum holding a camera. “It’s a weird black object and I didn’t know what it was,” she remembers.

When an infant Zoe first started using a sippy cup in 2009, her mum Katherine delightedly told viewers: “She’s looking at me so funny, talking to the camera.” Now 35, she began filming her daughter when she was six months old, but Zoe’s younger sister Piper, 10, is the real Truman in the family: her C-section delivery has 19,000 views. The Alabama family have just under 50,000 subscribers (mostly women in the 18–25 age bracket) to their channel, The Killen Clan, and like Tripp, Zoe and Piper’s milestones and mundane moments alike are caught on camera.

“I don’t know,” Piper answers when asked how it feels that thousands have

**“I’ve been  
obsessed with  
filming my entire  
life”**

— **Lora**

witnessed her birth. She sits on the sofa in a brightly coloured sweatshirt, her knees defensively drawn up – by her own admission, she’s shy. Next to her, Zoe sports dyed orange hair, matching eye shadow, heavy eyeliner, and a choker necklace.

Zoe initially thought her mum filmed her to show her grandparents – she was six when she realised strangers were watching. “I remember feeling like, ‘Well, that’s a little bit strange,’” Zoe reveals, “Random people

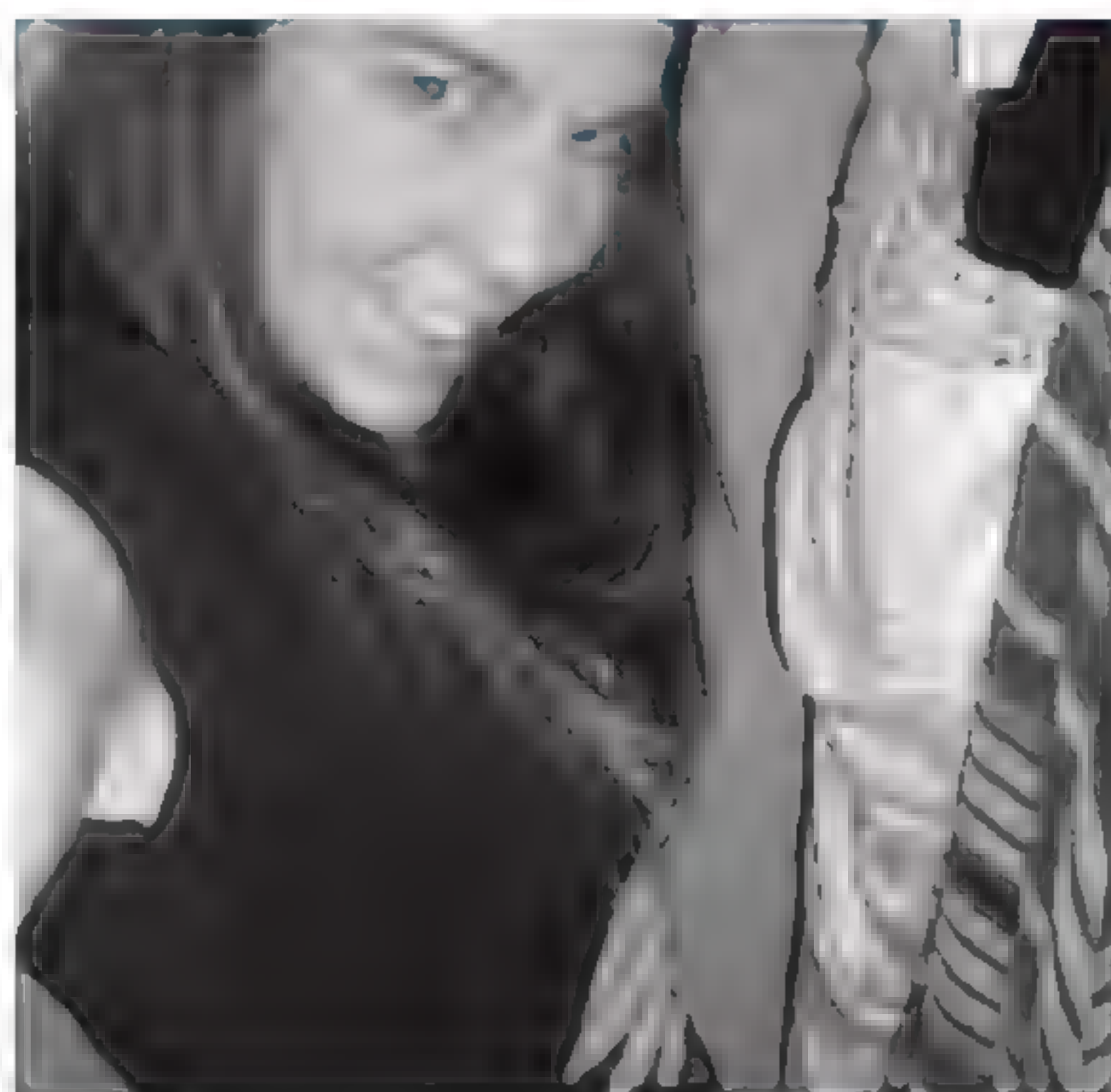




are watching me – it's like a Santa Claus kind of thing.' But as time goes on, I am just like, 'Meh.' It's my life, I'm used to it."

It took Piper longer to catch on – in the past year, she's opted out of appearing in vlogs because, "I get nervous in front of the camera." She also sometimes dislikes it when fans approach her in public ("Why do people always do that?"). Zoe was unhappy when someone ran up to her at school and asked if she was famous: "I'm like: 'No, please stop. Don't draw attention to me.'" (In the past, she's worried that people only want to be friends with her because she's on YouTube.) But the sisters have fond memories of a partially blind fan who came up to them in a restaurant and started crying with happiness, and Zoe still has a fox that a viewer knitted for her seven years ago.

For his part, Tripp remembers a woman who approached him at a swimming pool and described herself as "a fan since day one". In a 45-minute Zoom conversation, the only time he agrees that there is anything out of the ordinary about his life is when his mum mentions that some fans have named their sons Tripp. "It's kind of weird," he concedes – but then, a few moments later, he adds: "I don't think it's



**ACCESS ALL AREAS** (Top) Katherine shows off a tiny baby bump; (left) Piper as a baby; (below left) Piper and Zoe in costume



**"There were times that I didn't want to be filmed"**

**—Zoe**

creepy. I think it's like they've watched our videos and it's just inspired them. They like the name."

Connecting with strangers meant that the cameras kept rolling over the years. Katherine once got an email from a fan who said watching the kids "helped them decide not to go through with committing suicide". Yet it is also a job. By the time Tripp was two years old, YouTube money paid the family's rent. Whenever Lora got paid, she let the kids pick out a toy, meanwhile, she set money aside for college. How does it feel that videos of him as a baby will help pay for his education? "It's super cool because I didn't have to do anything," Tripp says.

Zoe feels proud that she's helped her mum make money and Katherine has paid Zoe in the past when she's assisted with sponsorships.

In *The Truman Show*, a running gag is Truman's wife holding up purchases and spouting off ad copy: "Why don't you let me fix you some of this new Mococoa drink? All natural cocoa beans from the upper slopes of Mount Nicaragua!" Both the Ellis and Killen families get money and free gifts from similar sponsorships. "I'd be really, really excited for most of [the free things]," Zoe says, "But there were some times that I had to say a certain thing and I didn't like that."

Is it embarrassing to have footage of your youngest, silliest moments online for ever? "For me, like, running around in a diaper, that's not really embarrassing," Tripp replies. If someone tried to pick on him at school, he'd say: "I'm the one who has 270,000 followers on YouTube, not you." Zoe confides that she's "definitely" embarrassed by some old videos. "There were times when I was a lot younger that I didn't want to be filmed but I couldn't verbalise that," she volunteers.

Three years ago, Katherine started asking for her children's consent to film them. "There are just a lot of poor judgement





## “There are a lot of poor judgement calls I made over the years” —Katherine

as viewers pose as neighbours to report both legitimate and fictitious concerns, ranging from allegations of abuse to fears about children playing by pools alone). Zoe worries about stalkers, but the family keep filming because they hope their videos brighten viewers’ days. “It makes me feel warm inside. It makes me feel like no matter what I do, I’m always gonna make someone happy,” Zoe says, “That’s kind of my goal, to make people happy and feel like anybody is welcome.”

When Lora and Katherine started filming their children, YouTube was still a relatively niche website, and family vlogging wasn’t a shortcut to money or fame. Today, it is so lucrative that unscrupulous practices thrive: no 1998 satire could have possibly predicted the L.A. family who filmed a toddler with a penis lollipop, or the Kent family who sold a replica doll of their newborn baby for £279. When these children become teens, they will have stories to tell.

But the world’s very first Truman babies don’t have too many complaints. “It is really exciting, because, like, nobody in my school has that much subscribers or views,” Tripp says. Zoe also has a positive perspective: “My goal is never to become famous, but to impact a lot of people.” She thinks it’s cool that so far she’s been able to do that.

As Piper was nervous on our video call, her mum later asked her in private if there was anything she wanted to add. “I used to feel like we were characters in a snow globe and the rest of the world was just outside looking in,” she told her. Although she has opted to step out of the snow globe, hiding in the background of family vlogs, Piper is happy she can watch her life back any time she wants. “I wonder if other kids wish they had the same moments from their childhood to look back on? I bet they do!” ☺

calls that I feel like I made as a parent over the years,” she tells me, referring to when she recorded her children crying or at private doctor’s appointments (in one 2018 video Zoe had to go to the emergency room after cutting her ear, her lip wobbling feverishly as she waited for the doctor). “But it’s never too late to rectify that.”

Another of those mistakes was living life for the online diary: “I didn’t vlog very much for the better part of a year because I realised I wasn’t going to the park with my kids because I wanted to, I would go because it’s good vlog footage,” Katherine acknowledges. Zoe also recalls acting up for the camera in her younger years. Tripp says he never did, although he divulges that he now misses YouTube – the family stopped vlogging in February 2021 after hate comments became too overwhelming and Lora feared for her children’s safety (she once called the police after a woman sent threat-laden hate mail). But the Ellis sons regularly ask if they can return to YouTube. Tripp would like to go back because he enjoyed the gifts from sponsors (he fondly recalls one “huge” Lego set). “If Mama liked it, then I would still want to do it,” he says.

The Killens have also experienced a backlash, and viewers have called Child Protective Services on the family in the past (a large number of UK and US family vloggers have experienced this,



**CAMERA ROLL**  
(Above) Piper Killen’s birth;  
(left) Katherine with Piper and Zoe;  
(below) Zoe and Piper enjoy the beach





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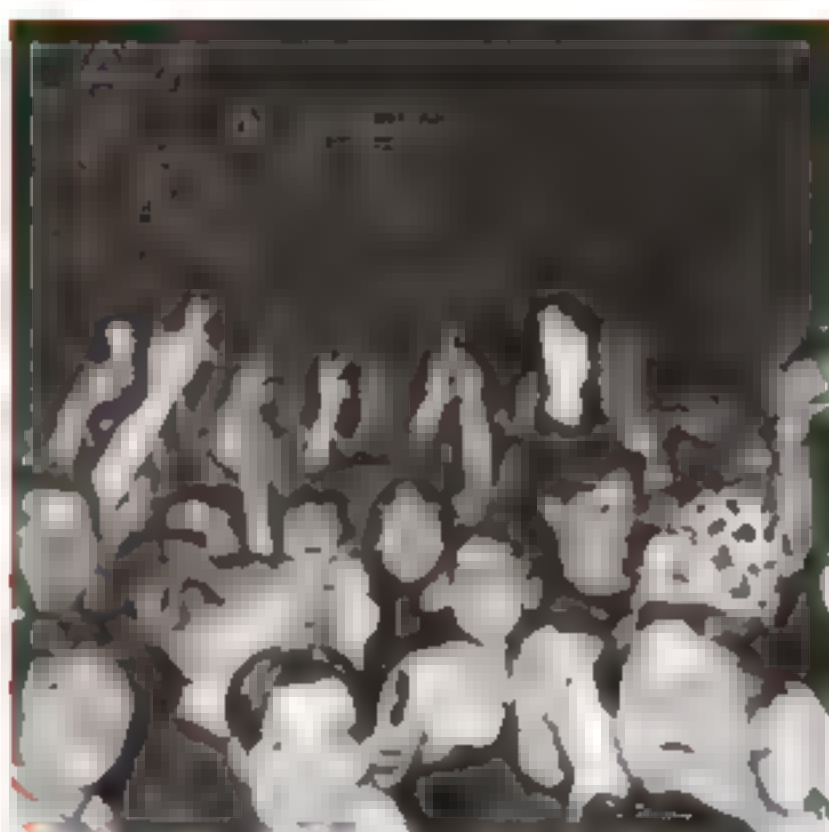


# Reviews

Music

## SOFT CENTRE

*Gallagher is “sick of acting like I’m tough” on his third solo outing – instead, he presents a touching and delicate triumph*



**Liam Gallagher**

C'MON YOU KNOW

Warner Records



**I**S LIAM GALLAGHER starting to soften up? Indie's bolshy hardman has built a career on singing unashamed love songs while maintaining a tough exterior as one who is seemingly altogether unmoved by anything and everything.

The pandemic got to us all, though, and on his touching and intimate Christmas 2020 song 'All You're Dreaming Of', Liam sang delicately of a love that will “be there when the world is at its worst” and “cover you in kisses unrehearsed”.

His third solo album, ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY  
**Michael Dunbabin**





*C'mon You Know*, appears to have been a turning point for the Britpop icon.

On the new record, Gallagher cuts a softer and more breakable figure, and it results in a far more relatable album. Opening track 'More Power' begins with a children's choir. "I wish I had more power," they sing angelically before Gallagher's voice comes in for the first time: "If you want to keep the things you love, then you better learn to kneel."

The fact that Gallagher has managed to wrestle a successful solo career out of the Beady Eye-shaped doldrums he sat in a decade ago remains somewhat remarkable. It goes without saying that his solo shows – which have reached biblical levels over the past few years and will see him return to Knebworth this summer for two sold-out nights – still revolve around the Oasis classics, but his first two studio albums, 2017's *As You Were* and 2019 follow-up *Why Me? Why Not.*, kept Gallagher in the conversation while not reinventing the wheel.

*C'mon You Know* pushes things much further forward, though, to the point where its swaggering moments are the ones that feel out of step. "I had a girl, she gave me hell, in our flat in Camberwell" he shouts at the start of 'Don't Go Halfway', with its kiss-off – "C'mon you freak / you know what I mean" – at odds with the message and tone of the rest of the album.

The musical textures on *C'mon You Know* – provided by long-term collaborators Greg Kurstin and Andrew Watt – are perfectly tailored for Gallagher's impressive but largely inflexible voice. Before he'd only thrive when sing-speaking in a rage, but the chorus of the slinky 'Diamond in the Dark' houses a melodic vocal perfectly, while single 'Everything's Electric' is quintessential Liam, with his voice powerfully bursting out of its chorus.

If there's one track here that will feel most at home among 'Wonderwall', 'Supersonic' et al at Knebworth this June, it's the album's title track. Suitably, this is also the song that most strongly embodies the album's surprising but welcome philosophy.

Over a formulaic but moving slow-build of handclaps and gradually rising instrumentation, Gallagher encourages us to "start living, be thankful" and "show love". Most importantly, he sings it like he bloody well means it. "I'm sick of acting like I'm tough / C'mon baby, giz a hug," he then pleads, softening up and feeling more relatable than ever as a result. He'd do well to give us more of it in the future.

WILL RICHARDS

## NO MORE FLIGHT OF FANCY

On her new album, Florence Welch tackles life's big questions

UP UNTIL THE 17th century, bouts of dance mania – a form of mass hysteria that caused large groups of people to dance themselves into severe exhaustion or even death – struck occasionally across Europe. Attracting thousands of people, who would sometimes turn violent towards onlookers who refused to join in, the cause of these huge outbreaks remains a mystery to this day.

This strange phenomenon is the starting point for



**Florence + The Machine**

Dance Fever

Polydor

★★★★☆



Florence + The Machine's fifth album, *Dance Fever*. With a decade of gruelling world tours under her belt, the Renaissance-era image of being possessed by an involuntary urge to keep moving, faces contorted with pain, resonated somehow with the demands of being an artist. The lure of dancing took on a second significance. On the pulsing highlight 'My Love' – produced by Glass Animals' Dave Bayley – the instrumentation calls out to the very thing that

destroyed so many. "Now I find that when I look down" Florence Welch sings, alluding to a life shut indoors, "every page is empty". On the grandly layered 'King' she paces the kitchen, wrestling with the dual impulses to create bold, brave art and a safe, stable home. "You need to go to war to find material to sing," she intones, struggling to settle.

Although many of Florence's early releases pulled from the fantastical, and are scattered with Greek mythological

references, *Dance Fever* feels more closely aligned with the everyday magic and destruction of 2018's *High As Hope*. Just as that album rendered a rabble of drunk students as "foals unsteady on their feet", the regal golden crown perched on the brow of 'King' is wrenched out of a tense argument "about whether to have children / About the world ending and the scale of my ambition / And how much is art really worth."

Elsewhere, she succeeds in capturing the quiet comfort of a life stripped back. "It's good to be alive / Crying into cereal at midnight," observes the smouldering 'Girls Against God', drenched in the nostalgia of indie singles from 2006, and vague memories of hanging out in a basement with one of the era's eminent dance-punk musicians, Tom Vek.

Occasionally, the production leaves you wanting more: Bayley's collaborations surprise and conjure up a kind of eerie lure, but lower-key Jack Antonoff-produced songs like 'Back in Town' share a minimalism with Lana Del Rey's 'Chemtrails Over the Country Club' and it doesn't always suit. Although 'Prayer Factory' and 'Restraint' both work well as interludes, Welch's voice creaking like a wind-wrecked door on the latter, 'Heaven is Here' is begging to erupt into a full-blown epic that never quite arrives.

Despite its title, *Dance Fever* is far from Florence + The Machine's disco era. But still, Welch herself is in unstoppable form, and writes some of her most incisive lyrics to date in the process. EL HUNT



# Quick Hits

Six new albums you need to know about now



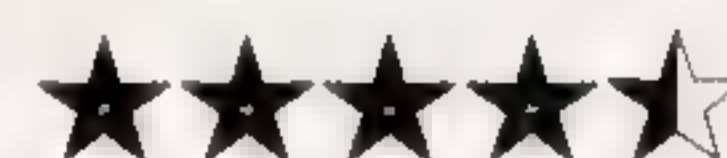
## Porridge Radio

### Waterslide, Diving Board, Ladder to the Sky

Secretly Canadian



**DIVE IN** Dana Margolin told Rolling Stone UK that she wanted Porridge Radio's new album to feel "stadium epic", and *Waterslide, Diving Board, Ladder to the Sky* is the sound of a band swinging for the fences. Although the instrumentation soars skyward, it's Margolin's intimate and relatable songwriting that anchors the record.



## Sigrid

### How to Let Go

Island Records



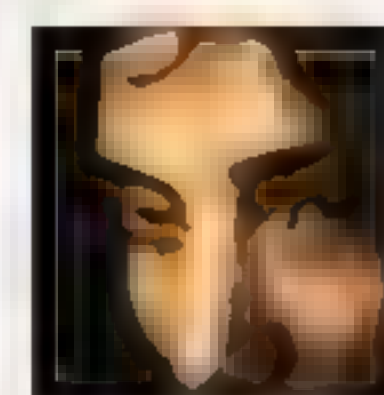
**SWITCHING IT UP** Sigrid's transformation from girl-next-door into full-on pop star on *How to Let Go* is most welcome. The relatability in her lyrics that defined her early work remains, but in the shimmering, ABBA-like groove of 'Burning Bridges' and powerful punch of 'It Gets Dark', she's stretching for the big league.



## Lykke Li

### EYEYE

PIAS



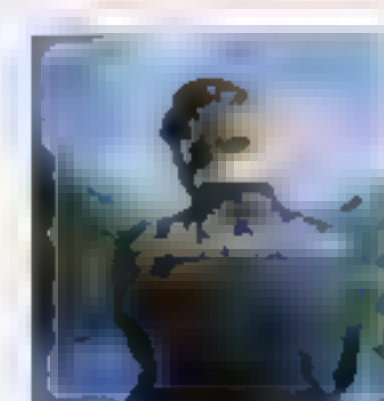
**IN OUR SIGHTS** Lykke Li's new audiovisual album *EYEYE* is her most ambitious project yet. In collaboration with director Theo Lindquist, she presents an all-encompassing vision through disorientating visuals and the misty, often ambient songs that accompany them, teaming atmospheric soundscapes with darker impulses. A sensory delight.



## George Ezra

### Gold Rush Kid

Columbia



**ONE TO TREASURE** Just in time for the post-pandemic summer of love, pop's nicest man is back. On third album *Gold Rush Kid*, George Ezra is as charming as ever, pledging himself to a lover on 'Anyone for You' and turning to synths on 'Dance All Over Me'. It's a grin-inducing delight.



## Angel Olsen

### Big Time

Jagjaguwar



**HEAVEN-SENT** Written while coming to terms with her queerness and losing both parents in quick succession, Angel Olsen's *Big Time* is concerned with endings and the new beginnings that flourish in their wake. Via lush instrumentation and her most accomplished songwriting yet, her sixth album feels like a sombre but defiant breakthrough.



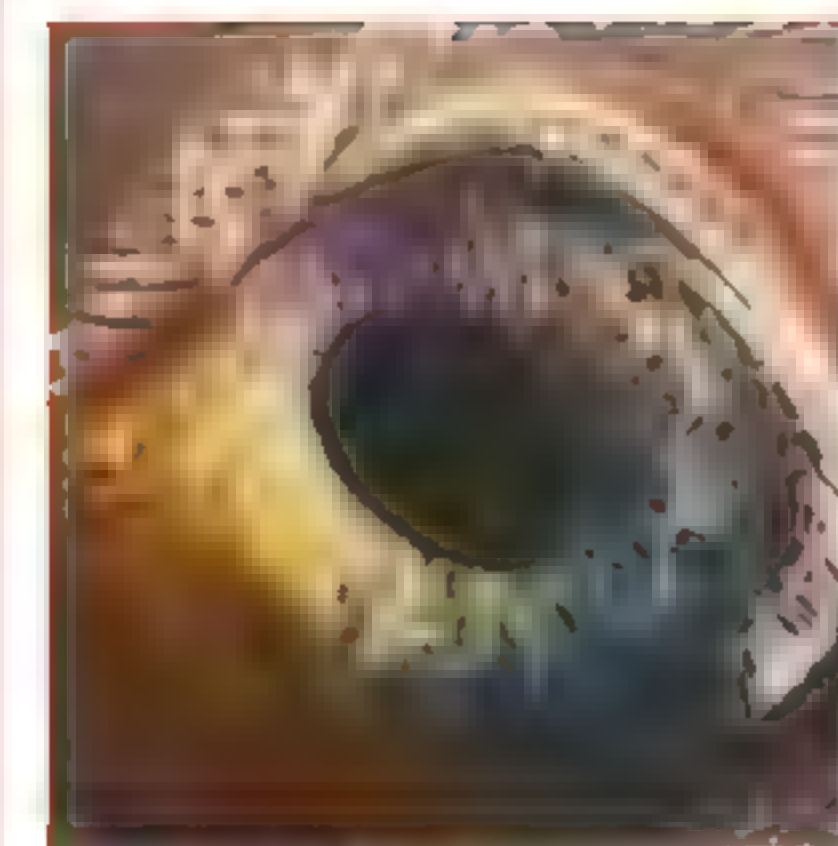
## The Black Keys

### Dropout Boogie

Nonesuch



**RIFF IT UP** Ever since their breakthrough in the early 2010s, The Black Keys have been happily plodding along a well-trodden blues-rock path. New record *Dropout Boogie* is no different. Anchored by hip-shaking opener 'Wild Child' and the woozy 'How Long', it's another unsurprising but solid delivery of throwback riffs, and that's just fine.



## Arcade Fire

WE

Columbia



## THE FLAME STILL BURNS

### WHEN ARCADE FIRE DEBUTED

2017's *Everything Now*, the brilliantly wacky Montreal outfit seemed to have fallen from their golden perch. But five years later, Win Butler, Régine Chassagne and the crew (now minus Will Butler who announced his departure from the band in the spring) are back with a renewed swagger on their sixth album, *WE*.

This seven-song LP has been a long time in the making with recording stuttering along since 2020, and there's no escaping the pandemic-induced human challenges that come through in the songwriting here. Split into explicitly named sides, Butler and Chassagne describe it as being about their 'troubles' — 'I' and their love for one another — 'WE'.

The opener 'Age of Anxiety' has an achingly beautiful beginning, before quickening in pace as Butler pants and roars, "Try to feel something in the age of anxiety." The nine-minute 'End of the Empire I-IV' is epic. Recent single 'The Lightning I, II' is a throwback to the heady days of 'No Cars Go'. It screams of hope and electricity — "The sky is breaking open, we keep hoping / In the distance, we'll see a glow."

Peter Gabriel's cameo vocal on 'Unconditional II (Race and Religion)' is subtle, yet it works perfectly with Chassagne's lead, whereas the final, title track has the delicate, acoustic energy of Tom Petty's *Wildflowers* era.

Ultimately telling their own stories about the darkness of isolation and the joy of reconnection, this album is a triumph and return to greatness for Arcade Fire. **LEE CAMPBELL**





Anson Boon as  
Johnny Rotten with  
Toby Wallace as  
Steve Jones

TV

# PISTOL-WHIPPED

*Danny Boyle's take on the Sex Pistols is shot through with punk-era 70s nostalgia and larger-than-life characters*

**H**ELMED by Danny Boyle, the Disney+ take on the conception, rise and fall of the Sex Pistols is a raucous, headbanging excursion into 70s London. Peppered with footage of Barbara Windsor's bra pinging off in *Carry On Camping* and Michael Caine having a great idea in *The Italian Job*, *Pistol* (sometimes literally) rips up the fabric

of the monumental clash of British culture and repurposes it to fit the cacophony of a group of angry young men trying to find their sound.

If you weren't around during 70s punk-era Britain, *Pistol* will intimately acquaint you with the time. As fans of *Trainspotting* or *Slumdog Millionaire* will know, one of Danny Boyle's greatest skills as a director is

plunging you headlong into scenes that jar the senses. You can smell the B.O., you can hear the splatter of vomit, you can feel the discordant guitars thrumming around your brain. The grainy images remind us of the grime-stained world these rebels inhabited and everything from the swastikas on the back of spiked leather jackets to spontaneous violent outbursts is

designed to shock and repel.

Perhaps writer Craig Pearce thought it unwise to tackle another Pistols story from the perspective of Sid Vicious after his story graced the screen in *Sid and Nancy* (1986). By basing the series on the memoir of guitarist Steve Jones, he brings

us a new angle, albeit an equally devastating one. Australian actor Toby Wallace steals the show as Jones, pinballing between obnoxious – in his attempts to seduce Chrissie Hynde – and anguished as he freezes on stage, his stepfather's abuse of him as a child echoing in his



Sydney Chandler  
(left) as Chrissie  
Hynde, with  
Talulah Riley  
as Vivienne  
Westwood



brain. The ghosts of his past are never far away and by showing just how haunted and damaged he was, the series finds sympathy in unexpected places, bringing in a new dimension for the more fairweather Sex Pistols fans.

Part of the series' appeal is how satisfying it is to see so many household names woven into the band's story. A young Vivienne Westwood (Tallulah Riley) and her then partner Malcolm McLaren (Thomas Brodie-Sangster), the manager of the Sex Pistols, are at the epicentre of London's punk scene with an unrecognisable and sweetly outrageous Maisie Williams letting loose as punk model legend Jordan who sadly passed away last month. Her rage-inducing outfits are a source of great entertainment, but these real-life people are all so fascinating and attention-worthy that peripheral glimpses of their characters are not as gratifying as the series promises. There are times early on where even the dialogue feels deliberate and mannered, which doesn't exactly go hand in hand with rebellion, but as the series hits its stride and the characters feel more comfortable with their punk personas, there is a lot to engage a nostalgic fanbase.

In true anarchist style, Johnny Rotten aka John Lydon attempted to block the series from using any of the Sex Pistols' original music by suing his former bandmates. As the Hendrix biopic *Jimi: All Is by My Side* (2013) proved, a depiction of musical icons without the music rights is fairly disastrous and thankfully, Lydon lost the case.

RHIANNA DILLON

# WATCHLIST

What to stream, what to skip this month



Ten Percent has a large ensemble cast

## ACTING UP

### Ten Percent

NETWORK	Amazon Prime
AIR DATE	Now showing
★★★★☆	

This is the long-awaited remake of France's superb *Call My Agent!*. It stars a plethora of huge names in the world of film and TV, half of whom occupy the roles of the agents while the other half tackle the far more onerous job of portraying themselves.

Jack Davenport is a delight as pompous Jonathan, heir to the agency that his father (Jim Broadbent) established. Jonathan is trying to pretend that his estranged daughter Misha (Hiftu Quasem) hasn't just inveigled her way into the office.

The cameos are of course a huge pull: Kelly MacDonald is forced to make an incredibly ageist decision — have plastic surgery or lose the much-coveted part of 'Birdwoman'? Elsewhere, best buds Hel and Olive (Helena Bonham-Carter and Olivia Williams in case you were wondering) are pitted against each other for a



Turing on the charm in Ten Percent

role in the latest film from Danny Boyle.

Those expecting draconian agents and vain artistes to be the butt of the joke will be disappointed. Putting aside the overdone W1A dialogue ("yes, no, yes, absolutely, yes, no..."), the characters are witty and entertaining. Any sharp edges are smoothed over with unexpectedly emotional storylines, which means that in an industry that we know to be one of the most cutthroat, there is an underwhelming amount of bite. RHIANNA DILLON



series), which opens in real time in the aftermath of Kathy's death. The question on everybody's lips: did Kathy fall, or was she pushed? The police think the latter but without witnesses, they must rely on detailed forensic evidence — *Dexter*, eat your heart out.

The series leaves us in a constant state of flux about blame and guilt, while expertly developing the individual threads of all the extended family members (peppered with famous faces) so that we understand where and how doubt can creep into such a

seemingly solid unit.

Firth, so adept at playing old-fashioned English gents (*Operation Mincemeat*, 1917 and *Mothering Sunday*, to name a few) plays brilliantly

against type, giving a fascinating and complex portrayal of a potential murderer. Collette has the harder job of recreating all the possible ways in which Kathy might have died, with intricately crafted scenes that are very hard to watch. Even with flashbacks, it's a shame that we're told rather than shown just how wonderful a woman Kathy was, but the politics of a case like this will be devoured by anyone with an interest in true crime. RHIANNA DILLON

## WHODUNNIT?

### The Staircase

NETWORK	Sky
AIR DATE	5 May
★★★★☆	

Kathy (Toni Collette) and Michael Peterson (Colin Firth), an all-American couple in an all-American suburb, are at the epicentre of this true crime drama, (also the subject of multiple docu-



Ida (Rakel Lenora Fløttum) with her father (Morten Svartveit)

# Film

## CHILD'S PLAY

*When four children discover their psychic powers, their thoughts turn to mischief in this Scandi horror*

FROM *Candyman* to *Let the Right One In*, housing estate horrors can be very effective. *The Innocents* might be the finest example of this subgenre to date. Set one summer on an estate in Oslo, Norway, it opens with another classic horror scenario: the new family moving into an unfamiliar neighbourhood.

Sisters Ida (Rakel Lenora Fløttum) and Anna (Alva Brynsmo Ramstad) have been uprooted due to their father's job. Their parents seem happily married, but under strain: Anna has been diagnosed

with severe autism and has stopped speaking. It falls to her younger sister to keep an eye on her as they play around the neighbourhood.

While Ida is more interested in hanging out with her new friend Ben (Sam Ashraf), Anna forms a close bond with a sweet young girl called Aisha (Mina Yasmin Bremseth Asheim), who can understand her better than anyone else. The four children come together when they discover a shared ability for psychic communication, which fills them with mischievous glee. But power can be

### The Innocents

STARRING Rakel Lenora Fløttum, Alva Brynsmo Ramstad, Sam Ashraf, Mina Yasmin Bremseth Asheim

DIRECTED BY Eskil Vogt

★★★★★

very dangerous in young hands...

It's a riveting scenario that should appeal to anyone who ever tried to play a game of 'what number am I thinking of?'. The idea that this gift could escalate into dark territory has been explored by many a sci-fi, but it's gripping to see it in a film with an otherwise realist vibe.

The minutiae of Ida's daily life brings you right into her world. This reminds you of how children form quick, practical bonds: they want someone to play with, so they find the nearest small person and they

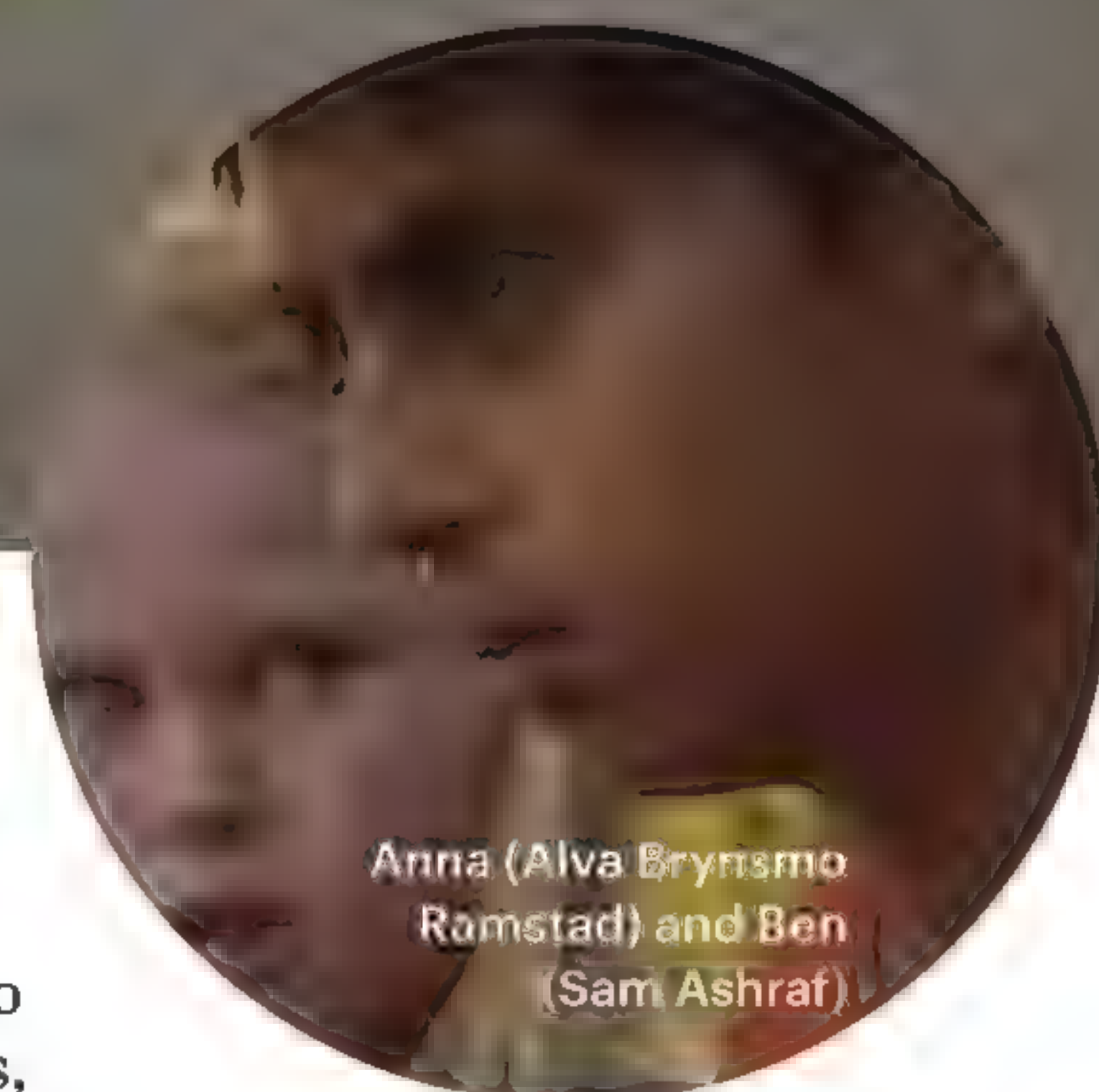
get on with it. The fact that the nearest small person might be a sociopath in training doesn't initially occur to them, and when it does, who can they go to for help? Exploring both the cruelty and compassion of children, and the grey area that lies in between, these kids must decide where their boundaries lie and figure out how to deal with adult levels of responsibility – without the help of actual adults, who are either too busy or not to be trusted.

And, of course, it's scary: watching children and animals in peril can be almost unbearable, and this has both scenarios, as well as a few others. But the frightful moments are spread thinly throughout this thoughtful film, giving plenty of time for reflection and character development.

Having co-written last issue's *The Worst*

*Person in the World*, writer-director Eskil Vogt is on a roll. In fact, all the departments impress, from cinematography and costumes to casting. This last one is absolutely key: the four central children are extraordinary performers who bring depth and poignancy to their scenes, and who invite an investment in their fate, regardless of their actions. Although most genre films stop short of killing characters under the age of 18, you're never sure if *The Innocents* will be one of them. But it doesn't feel exploitative or nasty: it's a satisfying, intelligent horror that feels frighteningly real despite its supernatural premise.

ANNA SMITH



THE INNOCENTS: (TOP) SIGNATURE ENTERTAINMENT; (INSET) MER FILM; BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: ©CHRISTINE TAMALET; BENEDICTION: LAURENCE CENDROWICZ/EMU FILMS





Juliette Binoche and the cleaning crew

## HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

### Between Two Worlds

STARRING  
Juliette Binoche

DIRECTED BY  
Emmanuel Carrère

★★★★☆

**JULIETTE BINOCHÉ** goes undercover as a cleaner in this French drama, based on the experiences of a journalist who penned a bestseller. Binoche plays Marianne Winckler, a writer who moves to Caen and pretends to be a divorcée in desperate need of work for the first time in her life. The job centre sends her to cleaning school, where she gets her manicures dirty with a convincingly middle-class mixture of reluctance and ineptitude, before gaining work in the port of Ouistreham.

Director Emmanuel Carrère combines Binoche's charms with a strong cast of newcomers. Her focus on tiny details makes for weirdly fascinating viewing: cleaning ferry cabins against the clock is quite the nail-biter. There's a palpable bond between Marianne and her co-workers that increases the tension surrounding her deception. What will they say when they find out she's not really one of them, and that's she scribbling down what they say for a book? She might well feel guilty, and the film itself is also in danger of being branded 'poverty porn'. But its intentions seem earnest, and if it's aiming to highlight the horrors of the gig economy in an entertaining fashion, then it succeeds. **ANNA SMITH**

## A WAY WITH WORDS

### Benediction

STARRING  
Jack Lowden,  
Matthew Tennyson, Peter Capaldi

DIRECTED BY  
Terence Davies

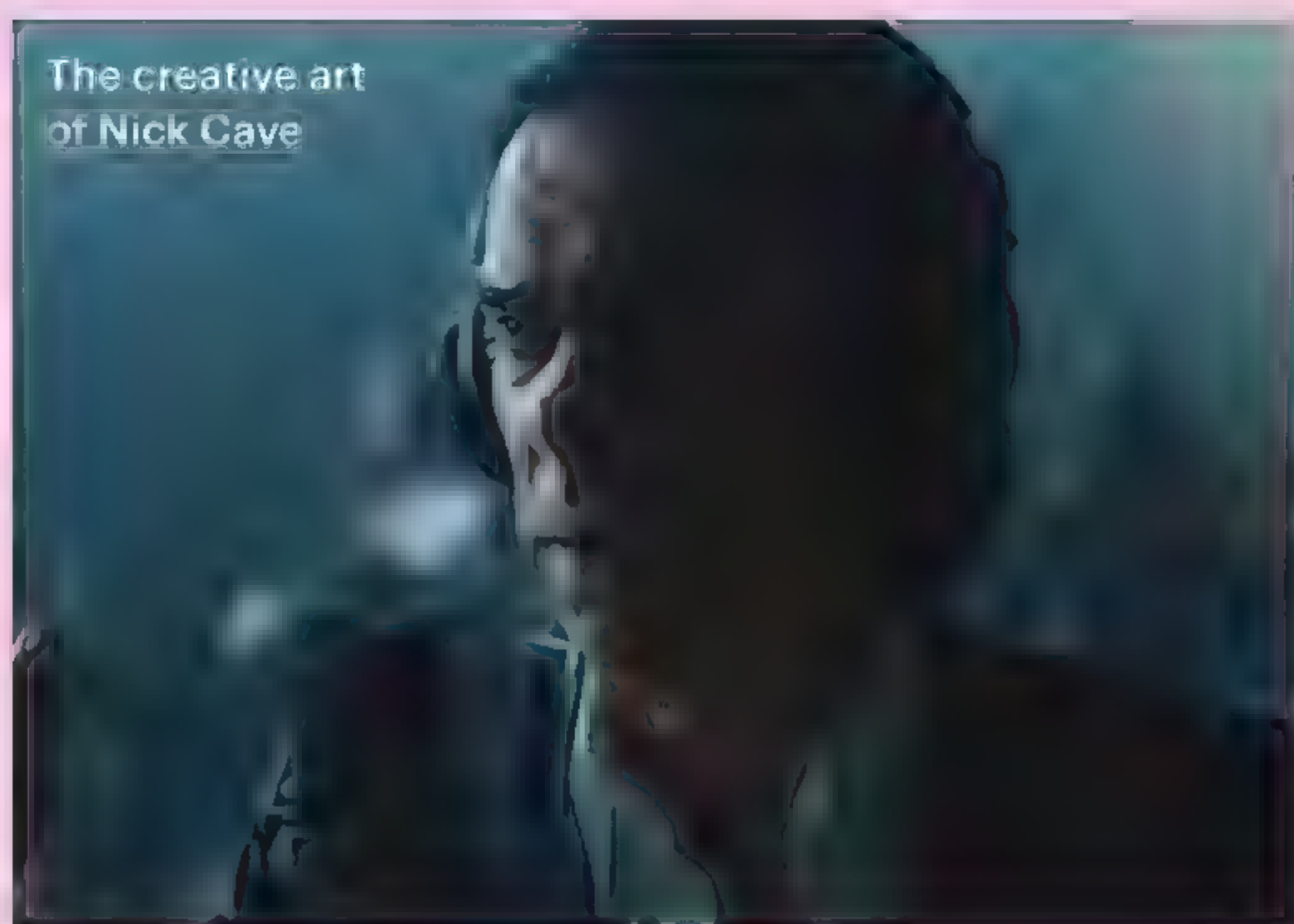
★★★★☆

**SIEGFRIED SASSOON** was a poet, a soldier and rather fun at parties, if this biopic from Terence Davies is anything to go by. We meet Sassoon (*Dunkirk*'s Jack Lowden) as he's checking out of the First World War and into a hospital, which turns out to be a great place to meet other closeted gay men – including poet Wilfred Owen (Matthew Tennyson). Their friendship is tragically short-lived, but there's no shortage of other fascinating characters as Sassoon hits the theatres, dinners and dance floors of post-war London. Jeremy Irvine is amply entertaining as Ivor Novello, whom Siegfried's mother Theresa (Geraldine James) observes to be "amusing but unpleasant".

But this isn't just a decorative whizz through the decades: it's a poignant insight into the mind of a man struggling to deal with the fall-out of war, as well as navigate his sexuality and relationships. Peter Capaldi is a slightly odd fit as the dejected older Sassoon, but fellow Scot Jack Lowden brings wit, heart and a great English accent to the younger role, perhaps his most significant to date. And each time you hear Sassoon's poetry, you're reminded of its power to move and inspire. **ANNA SMITH**



Jack Lowden (left) as young Sassoon and Jeremy Irvine as Ivor Novello



The creative art of Nick Cave

## CAVE IN CLOSE-UP

**WHETHER HE'S PERFORMING** or being interviewed, Nick Cave is usually fun to watch, and this semi-concert film does both. Having worked with him on *One More Time with Feeling*, director Andrew Dominik has clearly developed a rapport that helps bring out everything from Cave's dry humour to his kindness. Conversations in his home are intercut with footage of him performing songs from his albums *Ghosteen* (with the Bad Seeds) and *Carnage* (with Warren Ellis) in a scenic single location.

Marianne Faithfull makes a memorable appearance, but it's the relationship between Cave and Ellis that most intrigues, as Cave makes pointed but affectionate observations about the personality of his long-term collaborator. There's a darker note as he reads from his online newsletter, *The Red Hand Files*, where fans are encouraged to ask him questions about life. Even if you're not a fan of Cave, this is pretty interesting – and if you are, it's gold. **ANNA SMITH**

### This Much I Know to Be True

STARRING  
Nick Cave, Earl Cave

DIRECTED BY  
Andrew Dominik

★★★★





# RS ROAD TEST

## Genesis GV80

Not to be confused with Phil Collins' just-retired band of the same name, say hello to Genesis and take careful note, the GV80 flagship is, in fact, the Audi Q7 or BMW X5 you've always wanted

S

ay hello to the biggest car brand you've (probably) never heard of. A car brand that, just as Phil Collins and his band leave the stage for the last time, intends to jockey unashamedly for their Google ranking. Say hello to Genesis.

Long story short: Genesis is to Hyundai as Lexus is to Toyota, and as Audi is to Volkswagen — a standalone, premium spin-off from a

mainstream volume brand. As a result, there's the potential for good and not-so-good therein.

Good: if you're to buy a car from an all-new brand then it's comforting to know that its design, development and build is in the hands not of a plucky start-up but of seasoned, well-funded engineers who understand the fundamentals. Without this, you end up assembling a Tesla 3 beneath an awning in the car park.

Not-so-good: you can end up paying more for the same thing underneath, with more than a whiff of the emperor's





new clothes. An Audi A3 is lovely, but we all know there's a perfectly good Volkswagen Golf under there, right?

First acquaintance with Genesis suggests this might be different, however.

The GV80 flagship shown here is, very obviously, in terms of both design and scale, not a Hyundai. Notwithstanding the transformation of the Korean brand over two decades into the manufacturer of some quite brilliant product, what you see here is a step up in both presentation and execution. This is an upscale SUV with echoes of Bentley's

Bentayga in the outline and a Range Rover's crispness at the edges.

Genesis call their design aesthetic "athletic elegance", and the reality – imposing front grille, quad headlamps and a sizeable footprint – feels closer to prop forward than Olympic sprinter, but there's no denying it's well dressed for the part. This is one good-looking car.

It's the same when you step inside – the length and girth of the GV80 means a cabin with plenty of cubic capacity, but goodness me the space has been used well. The level

#### QUICK STATS

##### POWER

278PS

##### TORQUE

433LB/FT

##### 0-62MPH

7.5SECS

##### TOP SPEED

143MPH

##### PRICE

£56,715

of appointment is borderline lavish, though the design fundamentals are gratifyingly minimal, but it's the materials, fit and finish that are exemplary. Soft-touch surfaces are all about, the rotary gear selector is glass-topped, and open-pore wood finishes scream Scandi

penthouse. Alas, the steering wheel screams 70s Buick rental car, but you can't have everything.

On the move, that lovely cabin ambience is preserved. Rolling refinement is so good I found myself saying aloud "it's really quiet in here" to check my hearing. Turns out the Genesis folk felt that silence spoke to luxury, hence there's acoustic glass in the windscreen and front windows, hollow alloy wheels to reduce road noise and what's described as the world's first Road Active Noise Cancellation (RANC) technology, whereby a processor uses the car's audio system to output opposing frequencies to the noise coming in. The result is excellent.

As is the performance of an all-new, 278PS, six-cylinder diesel-fired powerplant, however counter-intuitive that sounds in a world moving to hybrid or

electric powertrains. There's a reason that engines like this were (are) popular in cars like these – they surge from the line, pull from low down and run quietly and efficiently at the top end. The GV80 isn't configured as a sports car, but there's plenty of go to match the show. So where does that leave us?

Quietly impressed. On paper, this is a car that sets no records, breaks little in the way of new ground and comes from a stable not yet known. But, like Phil Collins and his mates, that's not stopped this Genesis from stitching together an album that could well be a sleeper hit.

People who buy nice things enjoy difference, are early adopters and respond to good design and a high-quality finish. The GV80 ticks all of those boxes and a few more. **DARREN STYLES**

**GENESIS.COM**





### 100 not out

Workwear and fashion brand Dickies have created a uniform in more ways than one. Their clothes are found everywhere from factories and construction sites to skater parks, music gigs and catwalks. For their 100th birthday, Dickies have created a collection that pays tribute to their evolution, with selected patterns and designs repeated across key styles, including their anniversary jacket, with monochrome patch detailing and a zip-in vest liner. Khaki is a key part of Dickies signature look, with smart work and trouser combos mixed and matched with stripes, checks and motifs in summer colours and fabrics that perfectly tap into both the old and the new.

[dickieslife.com](http://dickieslife.com)



### Sneaker preview

The fashion trainer's impressive reign continues, with footwear on the catwalk and sell-out streetwear alike staying resolutely chunky. Always at the apex of the trainer trend, Alexander McQueen is setting our pulses racing with the Sprint Runner. The style comes in a myriad of iterations, including classic all-white and all-black versions, plus canvas variations in bone, navy and red. It also features an oversized running sole, flat laces and a padded heel counter and tongue, while the Alexander McQueen signature on the side completes the package.

[alexandermcqueen.com](http://alexandermcqueen.com)

### Wheely good

Hitch a ride with five-time Olympic Gold medallist and Tour de France winner Sir Bradley Wiggins by tuning into the pro cyclist's new podcast.

Made in partnership with MR PORTER and premium cycling experience company Leblanc, it was recorded as Wiggins and other celebrities pedalled 500km from Scotland to the Isle of Wight at the end of April. In it he discusses topics ranging from fatherhood and friendship to masculinity and dedication.

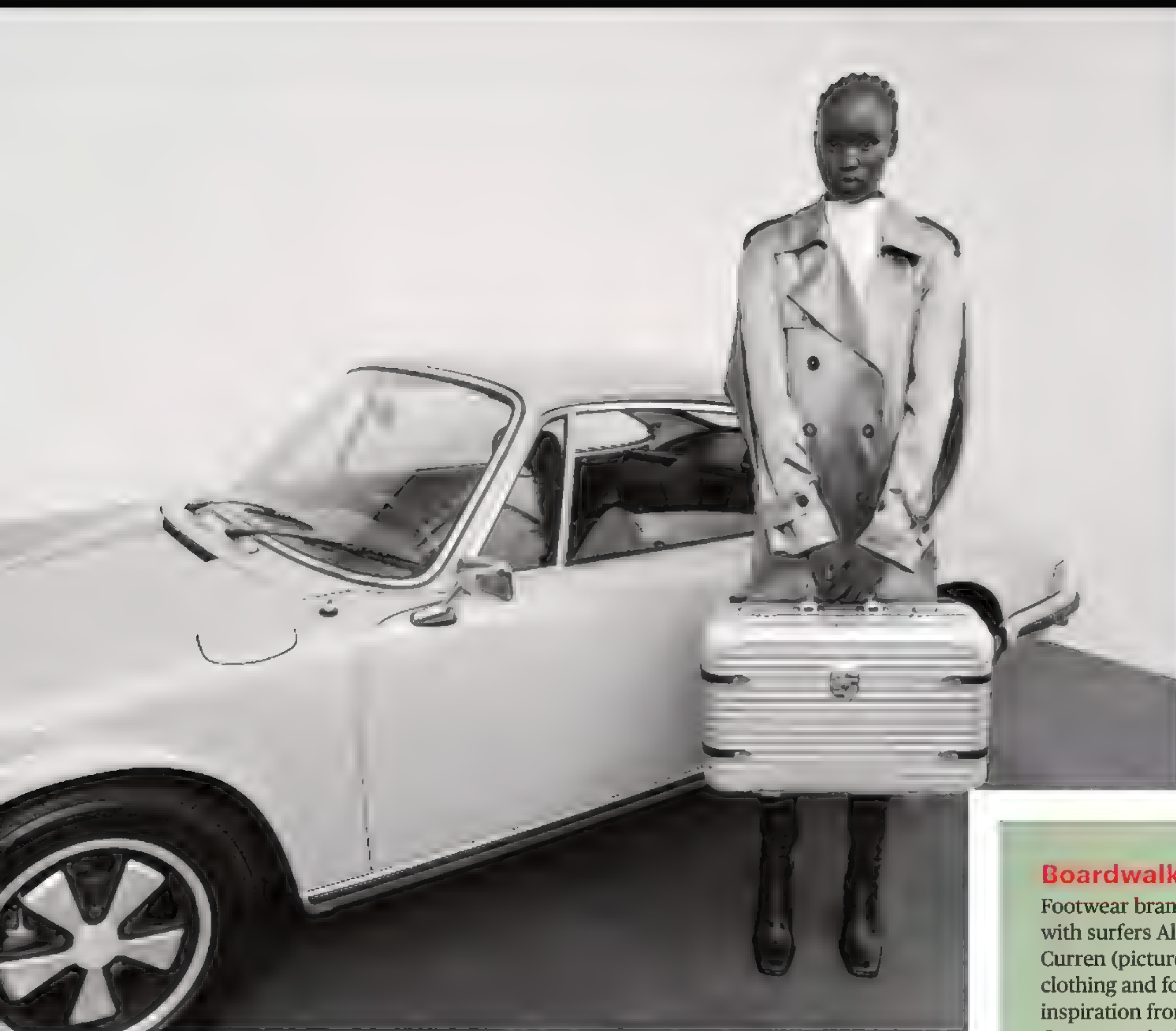
The podcast forms part of MR PORTER's 'Shoulder to Shoulder' campaign which aims to increase awareness and funds for MR PORTER Health in Mind, an initiative created to help men lead happier lives, powered by Movember.

Listen to *Shoulder To Shoulder: Conversations from the Road with Sir Bradley Wiggins* on all leading podcast providers.

[mrporter.com](http://mrporter.com)







### Bags of style

Rimowa make sexy luggage and Porsche make sexy cars, so it's a no-brainer that this hot pair should get together. Both brands excel in sleek, functional design and technical innovation, which is on display with their limited-edition Rimowa x Porsche hand-carry case, Pepita. It features the luggage brand's signature grooved aluminium as well as plenty of nods to the first-generation Porsche 911. These include a high-gloss finish emulating the car's mirrored silver look, an internal metal buckle resembling a seatbelt and a lock instruction label reflecting those found in the boot of Porsches. Finishing things off is a houndstooth Pepita fabric Porsche crest. Quite frankly, it's precision perfected. [rimowa.com](http://rimowa.com)



### Let it flow

Everyone loves a classic, which makes the partnership between heritage sports brand Gant and legendary fashion department store Liberty London an oh-so-pretty match. The 13-piece collection features a mix of vintage and contemporary Liberty prints – not just florals – on premium, soft to the touch, silky fabrics. Taking inspiration from late-60s and early-70s silhouettes, the range's flowing garments, including maxi dresses, headscarves and men's button-down shirts, are made for hot lazy days and nights, whether you're in the city or at the seaside.

Find the range in Liberty London and online at [gant.com](http://gant.com)

### Boardwalk

Footwear brand Vans have teamed up with surfers Alex Knost and Lee-Ann Curren (pictured) to create a genderless clothing and footwear collection that takes inspiration from 90s surfer ads. Knost and Curren worked with the brand exploring old films, concert screen prints and album covers for inspiration. The result is a set of pieces that can be sized up or down and worn, as Knost says, "layered, loose or form fitted". Vans' soul lies in its footwear and also part of the collab is the Colfax Low lace-up shoe, made with sustainable full-grain leather in moody forest night/black with an oversized lug outsole. It's all so cool, it transcends any surfing pun that we can come up with.

[vans.eu](http://vans.eu)





# RS TECH

SMART SOLUTIONS  
FOR MODERN LIVING

WORDS AND EDIT  
DECLAN MCGLYNN

## CHANGING TRACK

Using wireless headphones, Rode's new Rode Wireless II is a game-changer for mobile recording.

It's a common sight: a person wearing a pair of headphones, looking down at their phone, and talking. It's the most common way to communicate on the go, but it's also the most common way to miss out on the world around you. Rode's new Rode Wireless II is a game-changer for mobile recording. It's a wireless headset that lets you record your voice clearly, even when you're on the move. The Rode Wireless II is a true game-changer for mobile recording. It's a wireless headset that lets you record your voice clearly, even when you're on the move. The Rode Wireless II is a true game-changer for mobile recording. It's a wireless headset that lets you record your voice clearly, even when you're on the move.

RODE.COM

## FORTNITE FUNDRAISER

Epic Games' uber-popular platform raises £110m for Ukraine relief

Popular video game and virtual social space Fortnite has raised more than £110 million for humanitarian efforts in Ukraine. The game's publisher Epic Games announced on 21 March that proceeds from all in-game sales would go towards Unicef, Direct Relief, the UN Refugee Agency and the UN World Food Programme, who are assisting with the crisis in Ukraine. In-game sales include everything from character skins and items to virtual Fortnite currency, with Microsoft also donating the fee they'd usually take from in-game purchases on Xbox. The fundraiser ran until 3 April.

EPICGAMES.COM



## INBOX RELIEF

Gated aims to clean up your inbox while raising money for charity

Are your emails out of control? Gated is a new start-up based out of San Francisco that allows unknown senders to email you — but only if they donate to a charity of your choice. You can still access those emails but they're left out of your main inbox. It's a noble solution to a common problem.

GATED.COM





## SOUND SOLUTION

**JBL add new bookshelf speaker to their Studio Monitor range**

Speaker and monitor heavyweights JBL are renowned for their powerful, high-quality hardware, from portable, shower-friendly Bluetooth minis to high-end, cinematic, audiophile speakers for home and pro installations. With 75 years of experience behind them, they've learned a thing or two about sound, merging their finely tuned knowledge of core speaker design with emerging technology and connectivity. Their latest home bookshelf speaker — the JBL 4305P — nods to the past with its retro style while looking firmly into the future with multiple wireless and wired connections including AirPlay 2, Google Chromecast, Ethernet and aptX Bluetooth.

Although it's the first active speaker in their Studio Monitor line — meaning you don't need a separate amp to power it — it's as much at home in your kitchen as in your living room, with the range of connection options meaning it's easy to send music from any device straight to the speaker. If you did want to go analogue, there's a combi-XLR port or a 3.5mm standard headphone jack input too, for any device that might not be equipped for wireless audio. Finally, there's a handy bass contour control to shape how much low-end the 4305P kicks out, making it suitable for any room or environment. Surround yourself with sound for £2,200.

**JBL.COM/SPECIALITY-AUDIO**



## ROLI'S SEABOARD RETURNS

**The spongy keyboard is back with a redesigned model**

ROLI has announced a newly designed version of its revolutionary Seaboard controller, RISE 2. Famous for its sponge-like keys, the original was used by Hans Zimmer, Grimes and Pharrell, as well as appearing in *La La Land* and *Stranger Things*. An impressive list of clients then, and an 'easier to play' update makes it even more appealing. Get yours for £1,099.

**ROLI.COM**

## RAISING THE BAR

**Bowers & Wilkins add Dolby Atmos to their Panorama range**

Bowers & Wilkins is a badge of honour for any audio aficionado. Their speakers are the sound source of choice for the world-famous Abbey Road Studios and you too can have their finely tuned frequencies filling your front room via their new Panorama 3 soundbar. It's the first of the Panorama range to feature Dolby Atmos spatial audio, engulfing the listener or viewer in immersive sound, without the need for extra speakers or a sub. There's also AirPlay 2 and aptX Bluetooth for when you're using the new unit for music. The Panorama 3 costs £899 and will be available soon.

**BOWERSWILKINS.COM**





## Jon Hamm

*The actor on life after Mad Men and the time he shoplifted Fletch books*

**You were 15 when *Top Gun* came out. What did you think of it?**

I did multiple viewings in the theatre, and then the copy at my local video store was pretty worn out. It was so cool. Tom Cruise was in that sweet spot where we all saw the writing on the wall as to what he was about to become. And it seemed like every shot was at sunset and everybody was sweating just enough to look extra awesome.

**As *Mad Men* was winding down, what did you want your career afterwards to look like?**

You have this legacy, right? That never goes away. So mostly, it's "What do you want to make of the rest of it?" I've had an incredibly fortunate run, and to get to do things that I've always wanted to do, like be in a *Top Gun* movie, host *SNL*, work with people whose work I totally respect, like Tina Fey and Amy Poehler and Kristen Wiig.... I'm not chasing accolades or anything like that. I've had my fair share, and I feel like I earned them. Mostly, I just want to do things that I would want to go and see.

**You became famous for drama, but go out of your way to do a lot of comedy.**

It always feels nice to be invited to play in that sandbox. Whether it's Tina Fey or Larry David or Bill Hader, those people are all operating at a very high level. I just got off a podcast with Dana Carvey and David Spade, and I'm like, "Oh, my God. I watched you guys from my friend's basement." It's the Sally Field thing, right? "You actually like me. That's very cool. Thank you."

**Where did that love of comedy come from?**

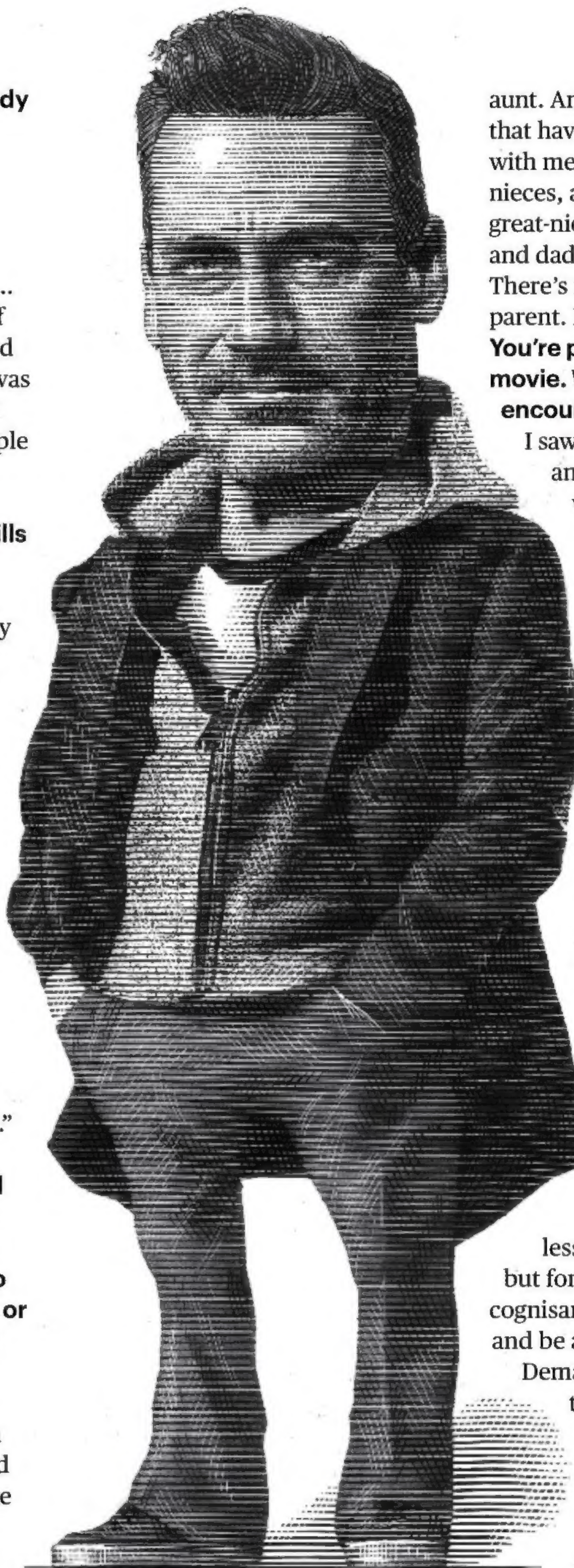
I would go to the library and check out the comedy albums, and to my mother's consternation, it was Richard Pryor and Cheech and Chong.... I'm sure that I didn't get half of the jokes, but I got the pace and the rhythms, and I knew that was what jokes sounded like. And I was very aware that those people put a lot of time into how that comes across.

**What did you do to pay the bills before you started acting regularly?**

Anything I could. My first steady gig was at a restaurant down in Venice. Within a few weeks of me starting, Darren [Pettie], the guy who worked the raw bar, was quitting to go to Julliard [School, New York], and suggested I do his job. I don't hear from him until I'm shooting day one of the pilot of *Mad Men*, where he played [Sterling Cooper client] Lee Garner Jr. We saw each other in the makeup trailer, and he goes, "Who are you playing?" And I said, "Don Draper." He goes, "Oh, my God, that's great."

**Your mother died when you were 10, and your father died when you were 20. Have you ever thought about whether you would have moved out to LA to become an actor if one or both of your parents had still been around?**

It's the sliding doors of it all, right? Mostly I think about it in the sense that I wish they could see what I've been able to make out of my life. But I have my aunt, my uncle, and my other



aunt. And I have extended family that have gotten to experience this with me, and my sisters, and my nieces, and my great-nephews and great-nieces. But, yeah, your mum and dad are your mum and dad. There's never a good time to lose a parent. But I've got pictures.

**You're playing Fletch in a new movie. When did you first encounter the character?**

I saw the Chevy Chase movie, and it said in the credits it was based on a book. I went to Waldenbooks in the mall, and they had half a row of them on a shelf. I just thought, "Oh, man, are you kidding me? I need eight of this!" I didn't have any money, so I shoplifted them. I think the statute of limitations has run out, but I owe Waldenbooks \$35 plus interest.

**What's the best advice anyone ever gave you?**

Show up on time and be prepared. That was my high-school acting teacher. And I can't say that I've always done that, but I am a ridiculously punctual person. Those two things are pretty good

lessons, not just for actors, but for anybody, to really be cognisant of other people's time and be aware of your own as well.

Demand what you need. And there's a right way and wrong way of doing a lot of things; try to always be on the right side of that collision.

ALAN SEPINWALL



# SLINGSBY™

PREMIUM GIN

NEW



Inspired by its spa town heritage and enjoyed around the world, Slingsby premium gin is crafted with pure spring water and real fruits to create the finest, award-winning British gin. With initial floral hints of violet, followed by notes of rich blackberry jam, Slingsby's Blackberry Gin is a bright, fruity and refreshing spirit.

**Bottling the beautiful and restorative nature of Harrogate  
for you to experience with every sip.**



## SLINGSBY BRAMBLE

50ml Slingsby Blackberry Gin  
25ml freshly squeezed lemon juice  
12.5ml sugar syrup  
12.5ml Crème de Mure

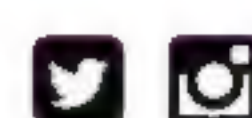
Add the Blackberry Gin, lemon juice and sugar syrup to a cocktail shaker and shake with ice until chilled. Strain into an old fashion rocks glass filled with crushed ice. Drizzle the Crème de Mure over the ice and garnish with a lemon wheel and fresh blackberries.



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